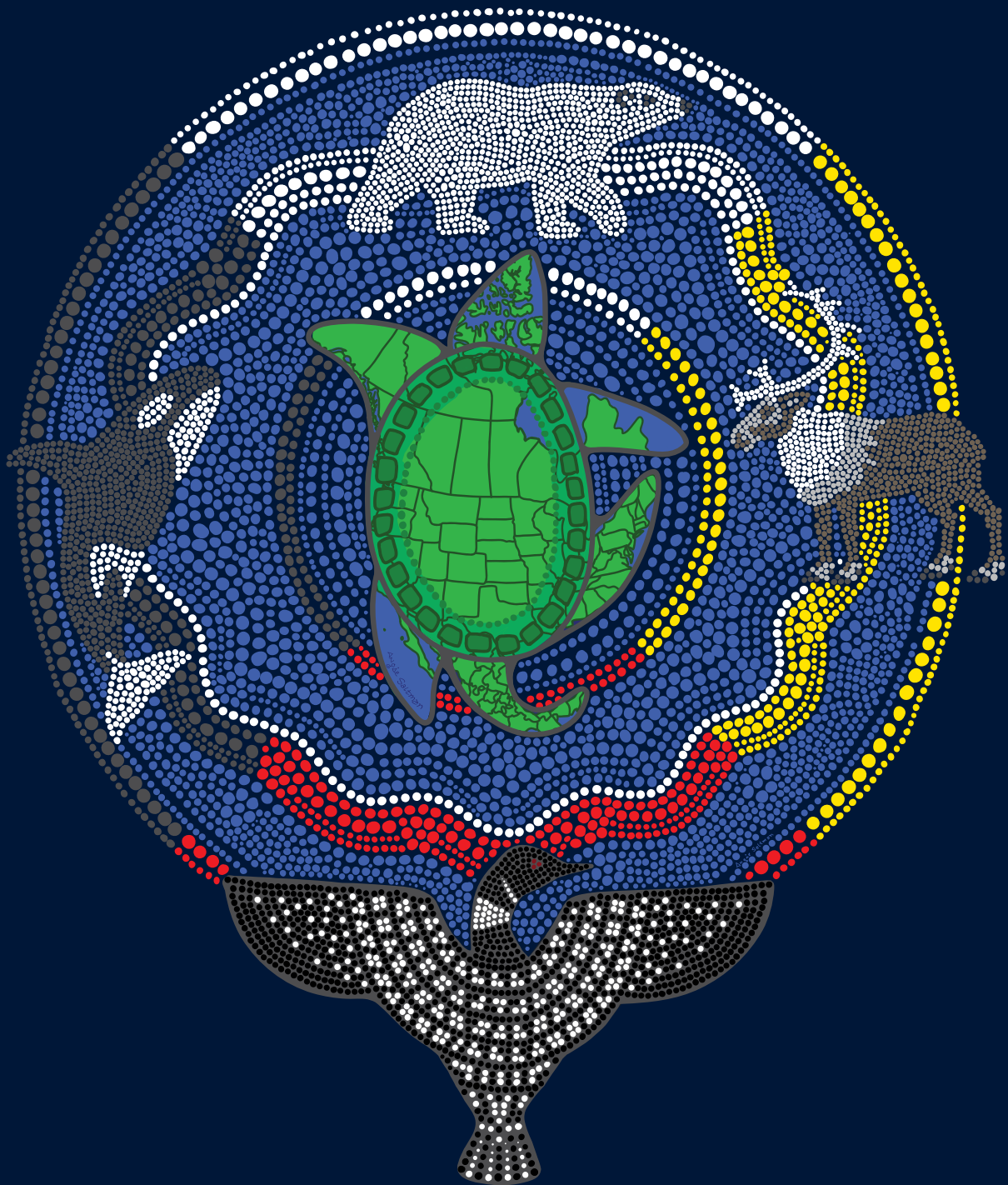




Sustainable Trade in North America: Indigenous Perspectives

Summary of Roundtable Discussions and Annotated Notes



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Cover Image by Angie Saltman (Red River Métis) representing the essence of Indigenous trade on Turtle Island (North America) among Canada, Mexico and the United States. The foundation of the design is the Loon — one of the original clans in Anishinaabe governance. The Loon represents the diplomat who travels to build working relationships. Similarly, modern entrepreneurs often travel when exporting their goods and services. The Loon stands ready to go in any of the four directions of the Indigenous economy. The Killer Whale (Orca) symbolizes family, community, protection, and power and often represents the Pacific Northwest. It is a reminder of the importance of kinship and the history of Indigenous People, as they move across the land and seas. On the right of the design, the Caribou represents the Eastern areas of Turtle Island. Caribou travel large distances while remaining together as a group for community, safety, and raising their young. This community reflects the importance of people-to-people connections in Indigenous trade. The Polar Bear at the top represents intelligence, strength, and resilience, especially in harsh environments. Polar bears are admired and valued by the Inuit and have been a vital means of survival for the northernmost people on Turtle Island for thousands of years. The Medicine Wheel central to the design shows the interconnectedness of all our relations. It emphasizes balance, harmony, and respecting all living things while understanding our place in the universe. In this design, black represents water, red is for the land, yellow is for fire, and white (pointing North) is for air. There's an Anishinaabe saying that when all nations of the world drum together, we'll connect as one race and find peace. The artist believes that as Indigenous economies expand through trade and growth, we'll shift business philosophies globally to the sustainability-first mindset and realize we must live in reciprocity with Mother Earth to sustain a safe place for our children and future generations to enjoy.

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Table of Contents

Introduction	4		
Acknowledgements	8		
Foreword by Nicolas Kosoy, Associate Professor at the Faculty of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences, McGill Bieler School of Environment	12		
Preface by Jorge Daniel Taillant, Executive Director of the CEC	14		
Roundtable Summary of Discussions and Annotated Notes	17		
Welcoming Ceremony	18		
Opening Remarks by Octaviana V. Trujillo (Yaqui, Arizona) and Kathy Hodgson-Smith (Métis, Saskatchewan)	18		
Welcoming Remarks by Jorge Daniel Taillant and Nicolas Kosoy	19		
		Session 1: Indigenous Worldviews and Approaches to Commerce and Trade: Relational Systems and Sustainability	21
		1.1 Setting the stage, by Ronald Trosper (Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of the Flathead Indian Reservation, Montana), Professor of American Indian Studies, University of Arizona	22
		1.2 Open Roundtable Discussion	23
		1. How have Indigenous concepts of relationality, reciprocity and well-being historically shaped economic and trade practices within your community, and how can these principles be integrated into today's regional economic systems?	25
		2. How have Indigenous relationships to land and governance systems influenced trade and what challenges exist to better integrate them as part of current trade dynamics?	26
		3. How have Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Traditional Ecological Knowledge influenced contemporary trade practices?	27
		4. What opportunities exist to expand Indigenous-led trade models and perspectives, and what support is needed to strengthen the role of TEK, IKS, and Indigenous economic frameworks in today's markets?	28

Session 2: Foundations of Indigenous Trade in North America 31

2.2 Setting the stage, by Kathy Hodgson-Smith (Métis, Saskatchewan), TEKEG Facilitator 32

2.3 Open Roundtable Discussion 32

1. What were the foundational laws that shaped Indigenous trade in North America and what should/could be their impact on broader trade practices? 34

2. How were Indigenous trade networks structured historically, and how did they facilitate the exchange of goods, knowledge, and culture across North America? 34

3. What role can international trade agreements play in supporting Indigenous trade initiatives and ensuring sustainable trade practices across borders? 35

4. In what ways can IKS and TEK inform sustainable trade practices and resource management in North America? 36

Day 1 Closing Comments by Octaviana V. Trujillo (Yaqui, Arizona) and Kathy Hodgson-Smith (Métis, Saskatchewan) 37

Session 3: Case Studies of Successful Indigenous-Owned Businesses in North America to Learn from and Inspired Others 39

3.1 Case Study from Canada, presented by Gwen Bridge (Saddle Lake Cree Nation, Alberta) 40

3.2 Case Study from Mexico, presented by Jorge Ramírez Pech (Mayan, from Mexico) 41

3.3 Case Study from the United States by James C. Hopkins (Algonquin/Métis from Quebec) 42

Session 4: Barriers and Opportunities to Support Indigenous-Owned Businesses and Sustainable Trade from Coast to Coast to Coast (Public session) 45

4.1 Opening Remarks by Octaviana V. Trujillo (Yaqui, Arizona) 46

4.2 Conclusions on Opportunities and Barriers faced by Indigenous-owned Businesses across North America, by Theresa Aslin Fresco (Lake Babine Nation, British Columbia) and Mindahi Bastida (Otomi-Toltec, Mexico) 46

4.3 Dialogue and Question and Answer Sections on Future Actionable Strategies to Support the Growth of Indigenous Businesses and Strengthen Trade Networks Rooted in Indigenous Values and Sustainability, Moderated by Kathy Hodgson-Smith (Métis, Saskatchewan) 50

4.4 Closing of the Public Session by Kathy Hodgson-Smith (Métis, Saskatchewan) 52

Annex 1. Guiding Questions and Other Considerations for the Dialogue 54

About Us 56

Introduction

Trade across North America has long shaped the region's identity and has been the cornerstone of community prosperity and sustainability. Rooted in deep cultural connections and inter-relational ties with nature and ecosystems, Indigenous Peoples living in the region have traded amongst themselves for thousands of years, establishing extensive networks that have thrived from the exchange of goods, knowledge, and cultural traditions. These trade systems connected diverse Indigenous Peoples across what is now Canada, Mexico and the United States. Established through generations of lived experience and relational bonds between people, communities, nature, and ecosystems, Indigenous Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) and perspectives on ecological relationships offer transformative and innovative solutions to advance holistic sustainability, critical today, to address some of the region's most pressing social, economic and environmental challenges.

In this context, it is essential to create spaces for dialogue and collaboration that recognize and elevate Indigenous leadership and worldviews in shaping the future of sustainable trade.

The roundtable, *Sustainable Trade in North America: Indigenous Perspectives*, served as one such space — a private, trusted setting where Indigenous Peoples from across the continent could come together to exchange knowledge, share lived experiences and build collective visions for sustainable trade rooted in cultural values, relational approaches, and community well-being.

Co-hosted by the McGill Bieler School of Environment (BSE) and the Joint Public Advisory Committee (JPAC) of the Commission for Environmental Cooperation (CEC) and organized in collaboration with the CEC's Traditional Ecological Knowledge Expert Group (TEKEG), the event took place on 24 and 25 March 2025, in Montreal, Canada.

Over two-days, Indigenous experts, researchers and conservation practitioners, from the private, public and civil sectors of Canada, Mexico and the United States, were brought together at the CEC Secretariat (with virtual participation available) to explore how Indigenous values, relational approaches, TEK, cultural heritage, nature-based solutions (NBS), and the revitalization of Indigenous trade, can help advance sustainable trade in North America. Participants also discussed how policies and initiatives can strengthen sustainable trade and Indigenous-owned businesses from coast to coast to coast.

The discussions were structured into four sessions, three private and one public¹. Each session began with opening remarks from an expert who set the stage, followed by an open roundtable discussion, and concluded with a wrap-up.

Session 1. *Indigenous Worldviews and Approaches to Commerce and Trade: Relational Systems and Sustainability* (private)

Session 2. *Foundations of Indigenous Trade in North America* (private)

Session 3. *Case Studies of Successful Indigenous-owned Businesses in North America to Learn from and Inspire Others* (private)

Session 4. *Barriers and Opportunities to Support Indigenous-owned Businesses and Sustainable Trade from Coast to Coast to Coast* (open to the public)

¹ The sessions were conducted privately to allow participants to discuss the topics openly. These notes do not attribute comments to individual experts, thereby respecting the confidentiality of the discussions. The content of this document was validated by the participants to ensure their consent for the information shared. All contributions are presented in a non-attributable manner, in keeping with the spirit of the meeting.

The preliminary conclusions of the two days of roundtable discussions were shared with the public during the fourth open to the public session, which was held virtually on 25 March 2025. This session focused on identifying and discussing the barriers and opportunities faced by Indigenous-owned businesses across North America, with an emphasis on identifying future actionable strategies to support the growth of Indigenous businesses and strengthening trade networks rooted in Indigenous values and sustainability.

This document presents a summary of the main insights, themes, and reflections from the two days of roundtable discussions. It also includes annotated notes prepared by Theresa Aslin Fresco (Lake Babine Nation, British Columbia), Senior Manager of the Indigenous Partnerships and Initiatives Program at the Fraser Basin Council, who participated in both the closed and public sessions.

The reflections and recommendations captured here are intended not as a conclusion, but as an invitation — to continue the dialogue, deepen collaboration, and collectively advance sustainable trade that respects and uplifts Indigenous Knowledge, leadership, and prosperity across North America.

Key Points

The following key points summarize the context, objectives, and outcomes of the March 2025 roundtable, *Sustainable Trade in North America: Indigenous Perspectives*.

- Co-hosted by the McGill University – Bieler School of Environment (BSE) and the Joint Public Advisory Committee (JPAC) of the Commission for Environmental Cooperation (CEC), the event was organized in collaboration with the CEC’s Traditional Ecological Knowledge Expert Group (TEKEG).
 - The purpose of the roundtable was to bring together Indigenous experts, researchers and conservation practitioners from the private and public sectors, to explore how Indigenous values, relational approaches, TEK, cultural heritage, nature-based solutions (NBS), and the revitalization of Indigenous trade, can help advance sustainable trade in North America.
 - The roundtable created a unique, trusted space for Indigenous Peoples and conservation experts from Canada, Mexico, and the United States to exchange knowledge, share lived experiences and co-develop visions for sustainable trade grounded in Indigenous worldviews and values.
 - Discussions were organized into four thematic sessions and a closing dialogue. These sessions addressed worldviews on commerce, the historical foundations of Indigenous trade, case studies of Indigenous-owned businesses in Canada, Mexico and the United States, and strategies to overcome barriers and promote Indigenous-led trade across the region.
- Preliminary outcomes emphasized the importance of sustained cross-border collaboration, policy support, and recognition of Indigenous leadership to strengthen trade networks that are culturally grounded and ecologically sustainable. Key strategies to achieve this could include:
 - (1) **promoting the full inclusion of Indigenous Peoples within contemporary North American trade systems;**
 - (2) **revitalizing traditional, pre-colonial Indigenous trade networks and modes of exchange across the region; and**
 - (3) **enhancing recognition and market opportunities for Indigenous-made goods and services.**
 - This roundtable was the first of its kind and it is the intent of this summary to serve as a foundation for future conversations and collaborative actions aimed at advancing Indigenous-led sustainable trade across Turtle Island.

Key Themes



Figure 1.
Key Themes Highlighted
in Word Cloud.

Image source: CEC
compilation of words

Acknowledgements



By Octaviana Trujillo
2023 Chair, Joint Public
Advisory Committee

The year 2023, my tenure as Chair of the Joint Public Advisory Committee (JPAC) was marked by important milestones in integrating Indigenous perspectives and weaving Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) into the work of the Commission for Environmental Cooperation (CEC).

As a former Chairwoman of the Pascua Yaqui Tribe of Arizona, it was especially meaningful to me to translate the many years of dedication since the creation of the Traditional Ecological Knowledge Expert Group in 2014 — and the growing recognition of the vital role of Indigenous Peoples in environmental conservation — into concrete actions supported by JPAC.

Together with JPAC members, we set a humble yet ambitious goal in our 2023 Annual Plan of Activities: to continue supporting the work of TEKEG and the CEC's efforts to strengthen the integration of TEK and Indigenous perspectives into CEC programs and initiatives. These efforts came to life through a series of public forums that year:

- On 28 June, in Victoria, Canada, JPAC hosted its first public forum of the year on the margins of the CEC Council Session, under the theme *Indigenous Approaches to Climate Adaptation*.
- On 27 November, in Oaxaca, Mexico, a joint JPAC — TEKEG effort culminated in the *Trinational Forum on Indigenous Approaches to Freshwater Management in North America*.

It was during the summer of 2023 that the topic of Indigenous trade began to emerge in our conversations. This idea came directly from Indigenous experts and participants at the JPAC Forum, in Victoria, who emphasized its importance for the sustainable development of Indigenous communities. Subsequently, JPAC Advice to the CEC Council 2023.03 reflected this priority, in Recommendation #3: Support Indigenous economies and alliances across the three countries:

"The CEC Secretariat has historically played an important role in advancing projects at the intersection of trade and the environment. The topic of Indigenous trade, however, has never been addressed and represents an opportunity for the Parties to advance sustainable trade across North America.

JPAC recommends the governments of Canada, Mexico and the United States actively involve Indigenous Peoples in trade-related discussions between the three countries and support Indigenous economies and alliances through the creation of networks and of policies supporting sustainable production systems."

In October 2024, when the opportunity arose to organize a joint roundtable in collaboration with the McGill Bieler School of Environment (BSE), this topic had ripened on JPAC's table and was ready to take shape. After meeting Nicolas Kosoy, Associate Professor at the Faculty of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences, it became clear that collaborating with the McGill Bieler School of Environment was the right path forward.



By Kathy Hodgson-Smith
Leader, Traditional Ecological
Knowledge Expert Group (TEKEG)

It was a privilege to co-lead this effort with Kathy Hodgson-Smith, TEKEG Facilitator, creating a reflective space where ideas, experiences, and knowledge could move freely, weaving together past, present, and future perspectives.

I am deeply grateful to the CEC Parties, to Jorge Daniel Taillant, CEC Executive Director, and to Marcela Orozco, Samantha Gagnon, the members of JPAC and TEKEG, and to Nicolas Kosoy, for their dedication, guidance, and tireless support in bringing this roundtable to life.

Special thanks to Theresa Fresco (Lake Babine Nation), Senior Manager, Indigenous Partnerships and Initiatives Program at the Fraser Basin Council, for taking on the challenge of providing annotated notes from the discussions. I also appreciate the contributions of Samantha Gagnon, Advisor, JPAC and Private Sector Engagement and Karina Morales, Assistant to the Director of Advisory Groups and Public Participation at the CEC, in drafting this document.

Above all, I am grateful to the participants, whose stories, insights, and wisdom, enriched our discussions and illuminated pathways to sustain Indigenous trade while fostering resilient, interconnected communities across North America.

It is my hope that the dialogues and outcomes captured in this publication continue to inspire meaningful action, strengthen Indigenous-led initiatives, and nurture the integration of TEK and Indigenous perspectives — laying the foundations for a sustainable, collaborative North American future.

As facilitator of the Traditional Ecological Knowledge Expert Group (TEKEG), it has been a privilege to witness the growing recognition of Indigenous Knowledge and perspectives in shaping environmental action and sustainable development across North America. This roundtable, on *Sustainable Trade in North America: Indigenous Perspectives*, offered a unique opportunity to explore both contemporary pathways for Indigenous-led sustainable trade and the historical, legal, and structural contexts that have shaped trade in this region, as well as the participation of Indigenous Peoples within it.

The Indigenous Nation participants highlighted for all a vision for their future as self-determining Indigenous Peoples. Their vision is grounded in:

- Their cosmic cultural holistic world view: being one with nature, a duty of stewardship, their ancient spiritual relationships with their lands and resources, and a seven generations analysis.
- They speak to their sense of jurisdiction: their relationship to their traditional territories, traditional economies and food, long ago established.
- They spoke to their sense of vision for their relationship to others: public, private and other Indigenous Nations and the importance of inclusion of their traditional knowledge.
- They presented their vision for their economic future and international trade relations.

Indigenous Peoples seek to advance their economic future through the establishment of mechanisms built upon their longstanding relationships with one another and with the modern world in recent times. Understanding these historical dimensions — how laws, agreements, and policies have influenced Indigenous economies, trade practices, and stewardship over generations — was central to guiding discussions that honor the wisdom, resilience, and knowledge of Indigenous communities, while also illuminating pathways for equitable and sustainable economic participation. The stories and insights shared by participants from Canada, Mexico, and the United States highlighted the deep connections between Indigenous cultural heritage, Traditional Ecological Knowledge, and nature-based approaches to trade and economic development. These reflections offered both inspiration and practical guidance to strengthen Indigenous-led sustainable trade across the continent.

I wish to express my heartfelt gratitude to the Parties to the CEC and to the CEC officials, under the leadership of Jorge Daniel Taillant, for their commitment to advancing the well-being of Indigenous Peoples and all peoples of North America. I am deeply grateful to Octaviana Trujillo and the CEC Secretariat — especially Marcela Orozco and Samantha Gagnon — as well as my colleagues within TEKEG and JPAC, and Nicolas Kosoy, whose dedication and collaboration were indispensable in bringing this roundtable to life.

Heartfelt thanks to Theresa Fresco (Lake Babine Nation), Senior Manager, Indigenous Partnerships and Initiatives Program at the Fraser Basin Council, whose annotated notes so gracefully captured the richness and depth of our conversations; and to Samantha Gagnon and Karina Morales, from the Directorate of Advisory Groups and Public Participation at the CEC, for their dedication in preparing this document and reflecting the insights shared.

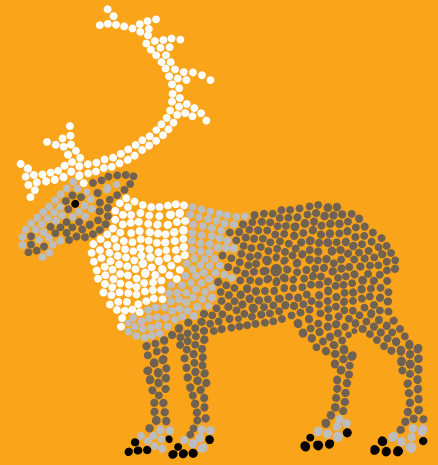
Above all, I wish to honor the participants, whose voices, experiences, and wisdom illuminated these dialogues and made them truly transformative.

It is through gatherings like this, where knowledge is shared, stories are honored, and dialogue is nurtured, that we can advance practical recommendations, support Indigenous economies and alliances, and foster policies and networks that respect both the land and the rights and knowledge of Indigenous Peoples.

May this publication serve as a living testament to our shared commitment: to honor the past, act with intention in the present, and nurture the generations to come — ensuring that Indigenous voices, knowledge, and leadership continue to guide the path toward sustainable trade and the well-being of North America's communities and ecosystems.

To the Participants

Deepest gratitude is extended to all participants, whose knowledge, experiences, and insights, shaped the discussions and outcomes of this roundtable. The following individuals contributed to these important dialogues:



Mindahi Bastida

(Otomí-Toltec, Mexico), Founder and Convenor, The Earth Elders

Gwen Bridge

(Saddle Lake Cree Nation, Alberta), CEO and Founder, Gwen Bridge Consulting

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Jorge Daniel Taillant

Executive Director, CEC

Foreword

By Nicolas Kosoy

Associate Professor at the Faculty of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences, McGill Bieler School of Environment.

As an ecological economist, I work within a tradition that has long recognized the biophysical limits to economic processes — a tradition shaped by thinkers like Georgescu-Roegen, who taught us that entropy ensures degradation is irreversible, and that economic systems are fundamentally embedded within, not separate from, ecological systems. We reject the neoclassical premise that infinite growth is possible on a finite planet, and we challenge the logic of environmental economics that seeks to price and optimize pollution as though ecosystems were merely inputs to be managed.

Yet even as ecological economics has critiqued the mechanistic assumptions of mainstream thought — the hubris inherited from Cartesian dualism, the commodification embedded in what Thorstein Veblen called “pecuniary culture,” the false precision of Arthur Pigou’s calculus of “optimal pollution” — we have not fully escaped the ontological assumptions that underpin these frameworks. We still largely position humans as the sole possessors of agency, the central actors in economic and ecological systems. We still work within paradigms that, despite acknowledging limits, often treat nature as subordinate to human decision-making rather than as co-participant in relational processes.

My recent work on relational economics has pushed me to confront these lingering assumptions. What if agency is not exclusively human but emergent, distributed, and fundamentally non-anthropocentric? What if it arises from assemblages of humans, plants, animals, waterways, and other beings — including those unseen — in constant, reciprocal exchange? These assemblages are not reducible to the sum of their parts; agents come into being as they encounter each other, unfolding in contexts of asymmetric power relations that lead to often unpredictable outcomes.

This relational understanding directly challenges not only neoclassical concepts like Pareto efficiency and “optimal pollution levels,” but also how we within ecological economics have sometimes engaged with questions of distribution and justice. Even John Rawls’ veil of ignorance, influential in environmental justice discourse, operates within an anthropocentric frame that obscures the agencies of more-than-human worlds. The notion that we can determine “optimal” levels of ecological harm — however adjusted for equity — still relies on a logic that privileges certain lives (human, wealthy, present) over others (non-human, poor, future) and assumes reversibility where Georgescu-Roegen taught us there is only entropy.



This is where Indigenous worldviews and practices have become essential to my thinking. Indigenous trade networks across North America — some stretching back millennia — have always operated according to relational logics that ecological economics is only beginning to theorize. They recognize that exchange is never purely transactional, that value cannot be divorced from responsibility, and that prosperity is measured not by accumulation but by the health of relationships across generations and species. These are not romantic ideals but rigorous, time-tested economic practices grounded in the recognition that all of Earth's beings are relatives — as Dr. Nancy Turner has shared, quoting Dr. Enrique Salmón, the respected Rarámuri ethnobotanist. They differ from humans in form but not in substance.

The conversations during the roundtable summarized in this document brought together Indigenous experts, researchers, and practitioners from Canada, Mexico, and the United States to explore how Indigenous values, Traditional Ecological Knowledge, and relational approaches can inform sustainable trade in North America. Though a participant and co-host, I entered these conversations as a learner, seeking to understand how economic frameworks might be fundamentally transformed when agency is understood as more-than-human, when reciprocity replaces efficiency as the organizing principle, and when kinship rather than commodity defines our relationship to the living world.

I believe that more-than-human agencies must be at the forefront of contemporary debates around socio-ecological transitions and economic transformation worldwide.

Our nonhuman companions can bring us to new pathways: toward what Thomas Berry called “mutually enhancing relationships” between humans and Earth, toward a planetary ethics of repair, care of life, and co-responsibility where all beings are regarded as social agents and members of a global community of life.

What follows is not a conclusion but an opening — an invitation to continue learning, to deepen collaboration, and to collectively advance sustainable trade that respects and uplifts Indigenous Knowledge, leadership, and relational practices — not as additions to existing frameworks, but by fundamentally reimagining what economics itself might become.

Preface

By Jorge Daniel Taillant
Executive Director of the CEC

In the fall of 2024, I spent a fascinating week at Spearfish, in the Black Hills of South Dakota, on traditional Indigenous lands of the Lakota-Dakota Nation. I was invited by North American Indigenous leaders to learn about Indigenous Knowledge and worldviews, to discuss Indigenous protocol, and to reflect on how Indigenous culture, practice and historical ways can help us find a more sustainable pathway and co-existence with Mother Nature and our ecosystems.

On that journey to South Dakota, I made several new friends and strengthened other friendships I already had. It is through these friends and colleagues and our inter-relationships that I am learning the profound significance of the buffalo, the salmon, and the caribou to our ecosystems and sustainability. I am starting to understand the importance of sweetgrass and the Three Sisters (corn, beans and squash), and how Indigenous culture and food systems work in harmony with our daily lives. In the Black Hills, I heard the creation stories of Bear Lodge (Devil's Tower, in present day Wyoming). I walked through the dramatic and magical geology of the sacred Badlands, where bison, bighorn sheep, prairie dogs and black footed ferrets have grazed the grasslands alongside Indigenous communities like the Lakota-Sioux, the Cheyenne, and the Arikara, for time immemorial. I paid tribute at Wounded Knee to slaughtered men, women, and children, and heard stories of fierce warrior-leaders like *Tȕašúŋke Witkó* (Crazy Horse) who fought valiantly against the irrationality of destructive resource depletion and cultural genocide. It was a trip of deep learning on my personal journey to discover an Indigenous Peoples' history of North America.

My last stop would be fortuitous, as many moments of my life have been, revealing my next step on this learning journey. I visited a wonderful shop in Rapid City that was overflowing with Indigenous arts, crafts, clothing, decor, and ceremonial items, and perhaps the most extensive collection of books about Indigenous history, culture and politics that I have ever seen amassed in a single place. Among those books my attention was drawn to one, by Ronald L. Trosper (Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of the Flathead Indian Reservation Montana), *Indigenous Economics: Sustaining Peoples and Their Lands*. That book opened a window into a new world to me, of new people and new partners, and of new ideas (new to me but already integral to the identity and culture of my already growing network of Indigenous leaders and friends).

They were all saying the same thing, perhaps in different words, tones and shades, but essentially the same idea that emerges from a growing discussion, largely centered on Indigenous worldviews. These ideas echo some of the most advanced Western discussions around the existence of a universal being that we find in reflections on quantum physics. We must understand that our environment is something much bigger, more important, and much more integrated and interrelated with our identity and our existence than most of us realize.

As we face a crisis of irreversible climate change and tragic loss of biodiversity, driven by excessive consumption and lifestyles that exceed Earth's capacity to sustain, we are coming to realize that everything is interrelated, inter-dependent and interconnected. The words of Chief Si'ahl (most commonly known as Chief Seattle) in his native *dxʷl̓əšúcid* (Lushootseed) language, leader of the *dxʷďəwʔabš* (Duwamish) and *Skwxwú7mesh* (Suquamish) peoples, come to mind. Chief Seattle professed a profound relationship between humans and the natural world, and called for the highest levels of ecological responsibility, underscoring that that humans did not weave the web of life, but rather that we are merely a strand in it. Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves.

As we face the perils of climate change, pollution, and biodiversity loss, we realize just how profoundly entangled we are with everything around us. What we do, what we think, and what we perceive, all matters. We have agency in our thoughts and actions in relationship to the environment. The trees and plants along our streets, in parks and in forests, the animals on the lands and in the skies, and the fish in the rivers and oceans, also have agency and determination. They are part of the environment and engage to define it, as we do, and we are ultimately a part of them, as they are a part of us.



The most brilliant Western physicists, such as Albert Einstein, Jane Dewey, Niels Bohr, Werner Heisenberg, Erwin Schrödinger, and more recently Karen Barad — who has focused her research on quantum physics, feminism, and the agency of matter — have written hundreds of pages about our physical and metaphysical relationship to the universe and the individual things that we perceive. Through theoretical and physical science, Western science has come to the conclusion that the limits and separation of our physical bodies from everything else in the universe is but a mere illusion.

Indigenous Peoples have known this all along. They have been reflecting on this relationship for tens of thousands of years. In their cosmovision, Indigenous Peoples across cultures, nations and regions, speak of “relationality.” They have long understood the concept that all things are inter-connected, the living and non-living elements of ecosystems, and the human and non-human beings of the planet. We are not separate from the environment, or from nature. We are an integral part of something that is much bigger than ourselves. *We are our environment. And our environment is us.*

Thus how we interact with all of the elements of our environment, matters. Our actions, our perception, and our place, define the environment, and they define us. The more we can understand this critical “relational” worldview, the better things will go for us, for the environment, for the air, the land, and the water. Respect, care, and reciprocity between people and nature are the pillars of a healthy, vibrant and sustainable existence.

The question that we must ask ourselves is: how can we collectively deepen our relationship to the interconnected nature of life and the environment, living more consciously, more responsibly, and more reciprocally with nature?

The workshop that hosted the discussions that gave rise to these notes sought to bring these issues forward into a trilateral, regional space where discussions about our shared ecosystems have taken place for three decades. We have begun an exchange and learning process about Indigenous worldviews, trade, economics and relationality that grows day by day.

North American trade brought into existence the Commission for Environmental Cooperation (CEC), under the trilateral environmental agreement signed by Canada, Mexico and the United States, in 1994. But trade between people and communities across the North American region has defined regional identity and has been the

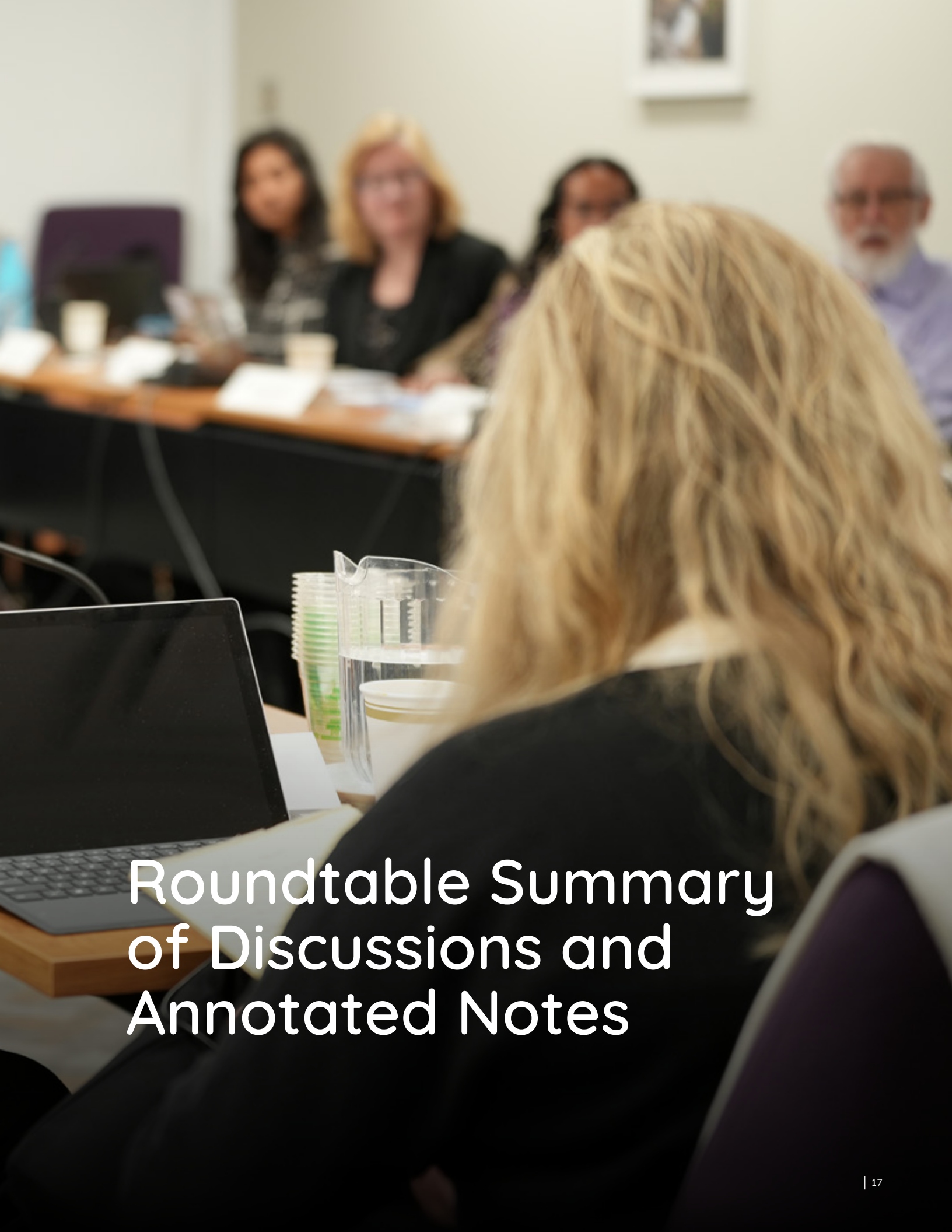
cornerstone of community prosperity and sustainability for many generations, long before the arrival of western culture, building close cultural and inter-relational ties with nature, ecosystems and people.

Indigenous Peoples of Turtle Island (the Indigenous conceptualization of and name for North America) have traded amongst themselves for thousands of years, establishing extensive relational trade networks that have thrived from the exchange of goods, knowledge, and cultural traditions. Established through generations of lived experience and relational bonds between people, communities, nature, and ecosystems, Indigenous Traditional Ecological Knowledge and perspectives on ecological relationships have offered transformative and innovative solutions to advance holistic sustainability and are critical today to address some of the region's most pressing social, economic and environmental challenges.

The roundtable, *Sustainable Trade in North America: Indigenous Perspectives*, co-hosted by the McGill Bieler School of Environment (BSE) and the Joint Public Advisory Committee (JPAC) of the Commission for Environmental Cooperation (CEC), and organized in collaboration with the CEC's Traditional Ecological Knowledge Expert Group (TEKEG), was conceived as more than a meeting. It was a gathering of knowledge keepers, practitioners, and allies — an opportunity to listen, to share, and to begin weaving together Indigenous worldviews and traditional ecological knowledge, with ongoing regional conversations about sustainability and trade. In the spirit of remembering and uplifting long-established Indigenous ways of knowing and being, the roundtable brought together Indigenous experts, researchers and conservation practitioners from the private and public sectors, to explore how Indigenous values, relational approaches, Traditional Ecological Knowledge, cultural heritage, nature-based solutions (NBS), and the revitalization of Indigenous trade, can help advance sustainable trade in North America and offer pathways for North America to reimagine trade as a force for sustainability and for healing our environment.

What follows is a summary of the insights shared during the roundtable in Montreal. They are offered, not as conclusions, but as contributions to an ongoing conversation — one that has been alive for thousands of years, and which must now guide us as we face the urgent challenges of our time.



A photograph of a roundtable discussion. In the foreground, the back of a woman with long, wavy blonde hair is visible. She is seated at a table with a laptop, a clear pitcher of water, and a white cup. In the background, four other people are seated around the same table, looking towards the camera. The setting appears to be a professional meeting room with a white wall and a framed picture in the background.

Roundtable Summary of Discussions and Annotated Notes

Welcoming Ceremony

Summary

Amelia Reyna Monteros Guijón, Indigenous representative of the Nahuas Nation from Mexico and TEKEG member, kindly offered to give a welcoming prayer to begin the roundtable conversation. She thanked the Giver of Life for allowing everyone present to arrive in this territory. She asked that the voices of the participants reach those who do not have a voice and that the element of the day was water, which purifies and brings peace. She asked the guardians to allow participants to be like fresh water — flowing into other territories and benefiting many others. Lastly, she thanked the ancestors of all participants for allowing them to be present, to share their words, and continue the work that has been begun.



Opening Remarks

By Octaviana V. Trujillo (Yaqui, Arizona)
and Kathy Hodgson-Smith (Métis, Saskatchewan)

Summary

After Kathy Hodgson-Smith, TEKEG facilitator, expressed her gratitude for being able to speak from the unceded traditional territory of the Mohawk, and Octaviana V. Trujillo, JPAC member, thanked Amelia Monteros Guijón for her opening prayer, as well as Samantha Gagnon, CEC Advisor, JPAC and Private Sector Engagement, Nicolas Kosoy, BSE Associate Professor, and the rest of the CEC and McGill team who are responsible for making the gathering possible. They also greeted the JPAC and TEKEG members in attendance and acknowledged the leadership of Jorge Daniel Taillant, CEC Executive Director, for prioritizing the topic of Indigenous Peoples and trade. They also thanked the participants for their presence and being part of a journey to sustain their work for the next seventh generations. Kathy Hodgson-Smith then offered insights into the historical and contemporary context of Indigenous trade in Turtle Island (North America).

Annotated Notes

The historical and contemporary context of Indigenous trade in Turtle Island was presented Kathy Hodgson-Smith as part of her opening remarks, setting the stage for the discussions that followed:

- Trade among Indigenous Peoples of Turtle Island has been happening since time immemorial.
- The modern trade system was built on the back of Indigenous diplomacy, key to the success of trade missions.
- Indigenous Peoples knew of the terrain, provided sustenance for traders based on accessing local food sources.
- TEK provided the foundation of survival and expediency and success of trade.
- The cornerstones of trade were the Indigenous languages.
- Trade was facilitated by kinship ties among the Nations.
- The role played by women with respect to relationships was key.
- Accumulation of wealth was not the basis of trade.
- Trade practices were complex and sophisticated.
- International and inter-Nation trade was well known.
- Relationships between Indigenous Peoples and their lands can inform modern trade systems.

Welcoming Remarks

By Jorge Daniel Taillant
and Nicolas Kosoy

Summary

The current trade model is failing; it is exceeding the limits of nature and is incompatible with ecological balance, emphasized Jorge Daniel Taillant as part of his welcoming remarks. As development continues to push beyond nature's thresholds, we are witnessing the collapse of biodiversity, pollution is at unprecedented levels, and so is the acceleration of climate change. That is why this dialogue is so vital — we can explore alternative ways of understanding our relationship with nature and rethink what development truly means.

Jorge Daniel Taillant welcomed everyone to the CEC, grounding the gathering in both a physical and a theoretical context. He reflected on the origins of the CEC under NAFTA, which were founded on the belief that trade could support development and also foster a healthy socioeconomic order — one that recognized the importance of stewarding environmental resources. Together with NAFTA, the cooperative agreement on environmental matters gave rise to the CEC. However, Jorge Daniel Taillant reminded attendees that trade existed long before modern agreements and thrived on Turtle Island well before the arrival of colonial settlers.

He also emphasized the importance of learning from Indigenous Knowledge Systems and creating space for discussions around alternative pathways. The North American Guiding Principles for Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) integration, and Indigenous

perspectives, provide valuable frameworks for this work. Within the context of the USMCA, there is a timely opportunity to advance this dialogue and reshape our approach.

Next, Nicolas Kosoy, a professor at McGill University, welcomed the audience and apologized for being able to express himself only in a colonial language. As an academic in ecological economics, he views the economy presented to us as a façade — not the “real” economy, and not what human beings are truly meant to be doing. Unfortunately, however, this is the world with which we are dealing, though that does not mean it is the world we should pass on to the seventh generation to come.

He emphasized the importance of shifting toward a relational economy, as described by Professor Ronald Trosper. Our world is inherently relational — it is not a world of commodities that can be reduced to numbers, efficiencies, and comparative advantages. The Ricardian trade model from the 1700s is far too simplistic and does not reflect the complexity of the world we live in. Therefore, we must begin to think in terms of relationality.

Finally, Professor Kosoy shared his vision for the two days ahead: a space for sharing meaningful conversation, love, care, experiences, knowledge, and envisioning the future. He emphasized the importance of Indigenous alternatives, not only influencing but leading the world toward a new form of trade — one where we define ourselves in relation to Mother Earth, and focus not on what we can take, but on what we can offer.







SESSION

1

Indigenous Worldviews
and Approaches to
Commerce and Trade:
Relational Systems and
Sustainability

1.1 Setting the Stage by Ronald Trosper (Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of the Flathead Indian Reservation, Montana), Professor of American Indian Studies, University of Arizona

Summary

Indigenous governance is inherently relational and decentralized, with treaty-making process rooted in confederation models, rather than top-down authority, as explored in works like *The Dawn of Everything* and *Linking Arms Together*. Professor Ronald Trosper reflected on his roots from the Salish and Kootenai Tribes in Western Montana, where he first learned the value of relationality by observing the tribal council in action. Their governance emphasized building meaningful relationships — even with settlers — grounded in mutual respect and collective responsibility. This approach contrasts with the hierarchical systems brought by Europeans, which often marginalized women and failed to understand that communities must lead themselves.

Three key themes emerged for Professor Trosper: First, relationality, which indicates that strong relationships help solve shared problems and build trust. Modern trade systems often ignore the value of the commons, reducing everything to private or public goods. This erodes self-governance and depletes shared resources. Restoring the commons must begin locally, not through top-down policies. For example, US Forest Service regions showed communities were already engaged — they just needed the regulatory space to lead. Second, sustainability is best achieved through local cooperation. When state frameworks allow it, communities can manage resources effectively. This includes reversing privatization and empowering people to protect their common property goods. Finally, perhaps our goal is no longer development in the traditional sense, but well-being for all. This means restoring relationships, valuing common-pool goods, and shifting away from maximizing production toward creating balance and care. Building bridges — even between those who disagree — is key to reimagining a sustainable, just future.

Annotated Notes

The session opened with a presentation by Dr. Ronald Trosper on three key points:

- Relationality and relational systems are important
- Recognizing the importance of common property goods
- A new goal: A just and sustainable future that ensures well-being for all

As noted in his book, *Indigenous Economics: Sustaining Peoples and Their Lands*, Professor Trosper acknowledged that...

the key to relational systems in Indigenous communities is a relationship among all living things, including humans and non-humans.

In relational systems, communities work together to solve common problems for the common good. The modern trade system does not recognize common pool goods (e.g., management of fisheries or river systems) and prioritizes individual goods. Consequently, there is a destruction of capital that belongs to the commons. To reverse privatization and rebuild the commons, the work must start at the local level, building relationships among all beings (an inter-species commons) and removing obstacles for restoration. Governments typically get in the way of this work and do not manage the commons effectively. Professor Trosper also recognized that environmental justice is a fundamental part of sustainability and that all voices need to be included in the process. This shifts the focus from development as the goal, to creating well-being and the building and maintaining of these inter-species relationships.

Indigenous cosmologies often reject extractivism, emphasizing instead the need to take only what is necessary while maintaining balance and respect for all beings. For example, in some communities, water is understood as the blood of Mother Earth, reinforcing an interdependent worldview that informs both governance and commerce.



1.2 Open Roundtable Discussion

Summary

During the open discussion, participants emphasized that Indigenous commerce extends beyond the exchange of goods — it includes medicinal plants, traditional medicine, and ancestral knowledge. Rooted in a cosmovision of reciprocity and care for the Earth, Indigenous trade reflects systems of giving back, not just extracting. Another principle in systems of Indigenous Knowledge that can influence commerce, is *compadrazgo*, which is based on reciprocity — giving and receiving. However, these systems and cosmovisions have been eroded by human rights violations, low incomes, and the injustice of having to pay to work one's own land.

Participants noted that Indigenous goods are produced through fundamentally different processes than industrial products, creating market inequalities. Many Indigenous communities often lack the resources to protect their intellectual property and market their products. Despite extensive research on traditional medicine and TEK, companies continue to appropriate this knowledge while denying Indigenous communities access to its benefits, highlighting an urgent need for legal action to prevent such exploitation.

A TEKEG member raised concerns about ancestral land appropriation by multinational corporations. She emphasized that Indigenous communities must retain control over communal land, especially in the face of threats from megaprojects like soy monoculture, which harms their health, their food systems, and their ways of life. In addition to land rights, a TEKEG member, along with many other participants, also underscored the vital importance of Indigenous Peoples being able to express themselves in their own languages during meetings with other stakeholders, ensuring that their perspectives are clearly understood, and fostering mutual understanding.

Looking toward the future, participants emphasized that access to technology is essential for Indigenous communities to enter the global market. There is a pressing need for support in obtaining labels and patents so that the high costs of producing and marketing goods do not fall solely on the communities themselves. One proposed solution is the fair-trade model, which originated in Mexico and was supported by an NGO in the Netherlands. This approach aims to build direct relationships between small producers and consumers, ensuring dignified incomes while considering the environmental and social impacts of production.

In parallel, participants called for Indigenous-led trade models that not only ensure economic opportunity but also reflect and uphold cultural values and knowledge systems. Several emphasized that products such as natural fibers and dyes are rooted in ecological knowledge and carry deep cultural significance, yet they are often commodified in ways that strip them of their context and reduce their market value. This erasure reinforces inequalities and devalues the labor and meaning behind Indigenous goods.

Some participants also expressed concern over the commercialization of sacred knowledge, stressing that ethical trade must center free, prior, and informed consent. Not all knowledge is meant to be shared, and Indigenous governance should determine what can and cannot be brought to market. In response to these concerns, participants proposed weaving ceremonial practices, language, food, singing, and dancing into trade events as a way of reaffirming Indigenous presence, identity, and relationality in economic spaces. These expressions, they emphasized, are essential — not ornamental.

Lastly, participants underscored the need to address digital and infrastructure barriers. Many Indigenous artisans lack access to marketing tools, e-payment systems, and branding support, which limits their ability to scale their work or compete fairly. Support for Indigenous branding and storytelling was seen as vital to ensure communities retain ownership and recognition for their goods and knowledge.

Finally, participants noted that Indigenous territories that have been well-conserved are often targeted by tourism, and this too can erode cultures, languages, TEK, and lead to gentrification — as seen in Oaxaca, where many properties have been converted into boutique hotels. They emphasized the need to create spaces for dialogue among multiple actors, especially those unfamiliar with Indigenous principles and governance systems, which are based on transparency and collaboration. Only through such dialogue can Indigenous Peoples' rituals, ceremonies, and ancestral territories be properly valued and respected.



Annotated Notes

To foster an open and inclusive exchange, a set of four guiding questions was proposed to help spark reflection and dialogue. These questions were not intended as a strict agenda, but rather as prompts to encourage participants to share experiences, values, and perspectives on how Indigenous worldviews and relational approaches to commerce can contribute to more sustainable and equitable trade systems.

These guiding questions and the following notes capture insights shared by participants during the open dialogue.

1. How have Indigenous concepts of relationality, reciprocity and well-being historically shaped economic and trade practices within your community, and how can these principles be integrated into today's regional economic systems?

These notes highlight how Indigenous concepts of relationality, reciprocity and well-being have historically shaped economic and trade practices and how they offer pathways to reimagine contemporary trade systems in more sustainable and inclusive ways:

- Indigenous People have systems of sustainability and collective responsibility that protects biodiversity.
- Community is the strength of Indigenous Peoples.
- Indigenous businesses embrace the environmental, social and economic elements.
- Ancestral knowledge reminds us who we are as a human species.
- *Compadrazgo* ("fictive kinship" or "ritual kinship." Mexico): Bartering are relational systems where you give something needed and receive something needed. No coinage or currency is exchanged, and the system enables sharing such items as medicinal plants, fruits, vegetables, as well as the exchange of ancestral knowledge.
- We can have trade but must think about relationships.
- New relationships can create new regimes — not just social, economic, ecological, but also the relationships between cultures.
- Role of Indigenous women in trade: women have invaluable knowledge of the land, waters, plants and animals, connect cultures.

- Concepts of respect, relationship, reciprocity:
 - + *Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) in UNDRIP* is a principle that moves away from domination and control to collaboration and collective action, recognizes Indigenous governing bodies, and requires significant consultation.
 - + *Earth Jurisprudence* — The Rights of Mother Earth/ The Rights of Nature: Earth jurisprudence is a philosophy of law and governance which aims to guide people to coexist harmoniously within the Earth community instead of legitimizing and facilitating its exploitation and degradation. Every being in nature, including people, must, at the very minimum, have the right to exist, the right to occupy physical place, and the right to interact with other beings in a manner that allows it to fulfill its unique role in ecological and evolutionary processes.²
- The Doctrine of Discovery exercises dominion which doesn't strengthen nature or harmony.
- Indigenous Peoples can offer the old systems of relationships.
- Oral stories have knowledge and this lives with Indigenous Peoples — Oral stories are not just narratives — they hold and transmit relational values and ecological knowledge, embodying lived experiences with the land and other beings.
- When communities stop a practice, their knowledge can disappear, too. For example, when people could no longer fish turtles due to environmental changes, they also lost the unique knot used to catch them. It's a reminder that losing access to the land or species can mean losing Traditional Ecological Knowledge and cultural continuity.
- Indigenous languages shape entire epistemologies and practices. For example, in the Seneca Nation, there is no word for "volunteering" or "retirement," reflecting a worldview where responsibility and reciprocity are continuous, not optional or age-bound.
- The following is an example of sustainable agriculture practiced by Indigenous Nations in North America: three sisters, intercropping method — corn, beans, squash crops (biodiversity value in this way of agriculture, not currently recognized or practiced) — maximizes resource use, enhances soil health, promotes biodiversity, and reflects co-existence.

² Cormac Cullinan. March 9, 2023. *Nature Rights and Earth Jurisprudence*. International Sociological Association. ([Link](#))

2. How have Indigenous relationships to land and governance systems influenced trade and what challenges exist to better integrate them as part of current trade dynamics?

Before diving into specific insights, it is important to present participants' reflections on the broader systemic challenges that shape Indigenous relationships to land and governance within trade dynamics:

- Colonial legacies in law and governance. Many current governance structures — laws on land use, conservation, childcare, and language — continue to reflect colonial priorities and often override Indigenous legal systems and relational worldviews.
- The roles and advisory functions granted to Indigenous representatives within trilateral processes are often voluntary and come with constraints imposed by the three national governments, limiting true influence and decision-making power.
- While Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) is increasingly cited in environmental policy, its application often lacks meaningful inclusion of Indigenous rights, sovereignty, and legal traditions.
- Mere recognition of TEK is insufficient; authentic integration requires respecting Indigenous Peoples as rights-holders, not just stakeholders, and supporting governance rooted in self-determination.

The following annotated notes capture key insights shared by participants on how Indigenous relationships to land and governance systems influence trade, as well as the challenges faced in integrating these perspectives within current trade dynamics:

- Instead of thinking about the land as a commodity, Indigenous Peoples understand land as a relationship. For example, *The Dish with One Spoon*³ is a pre-colonial treaty between the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe that is still honoured today. Used by Indigenous Peoples in the Great Lakes and St Lawrence Valley region, it represents agreements concerning shared hunting ground. The dish symbolizes a common hunting ground, while the spoon denotes the people are free to hunt within it and eat the game and fish together.
- Indigenous Peoples know the ancestral territories and where there is balance.
- There must be protection of the social, ecological, and economic aspects.
- It is important to defend our territory and resources.
- Indigenous governance systems make us accountable and dynamic.
- We need to consider intergenerational and gender aspects in knowledge transmission: youth don't know the story of their country and colonialism.
- Research has often been conducted by institutions treating Indigenous Peoples as the "objects" of study, rather than fully involving them or recognizing their leadership in the research process.
- Land reforms are having an impact (Mexico).
- Indigenous, small-scale producers of fair-trade products (e.g. coffee) cannot compete with big corporations. A relationship between the producer and consumer is needed for fair trade products, which allows for a dignified salary for producers.

3 Victor P. Lytwyn. 1997. A dish with one spoon: The shared hunting grounds agreement in the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Valley Region. In *Papers of the Twenty-Eighth Algonquian Conference*, edited by David H Pentland, 210–227. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba. ([Link](#))



- It's a challenge to think within international markets versus within local markets: the paradigms are going against each other.
- Without biodiversity and healthy ecosystems, you don't have Indigenous trade, which is the basis of Indigenous economic activities. Versus bio-cultural erosion, caused by deforestation, genetically modified crops, pesticides impacting the health of people, air, water, land.
- Crafts / textiles take two to three months to create because every colour, flower, animal has a meaning and is connected to Indigenous cosmology.
- Trademarks (intellectual property) of Indigenous design selling at lower prices, causes craft people not having the same value.
- The current development model violates the UNDRIP; talk of Indigenous rights in international agreements but lacking reality on the ground, means there is no justice for Indigenous Peoples.
- The current challenge in Mexico is that money needs to be paid to criminal organizations, and violence becomes a part of trade.
- Appropriation of knowledge — In Mexico (Chiapas, Oaxaca, Yucatán) — lots of studies on medicinal plants and biodiversity have been completed, studies which were financed largely by large pharmaceutical and cosmetics companies and they have now patented the knowledge.
 - + Free, Prior & Informed Consent (FPIC) needs to be the approach to TEK or Indigenous Knowledge.
 - + Patents and copyrights do not extend to elements of Indigenous Knowledge (which is not recognized under intellectual property law).

Inequitable access to the Internet in rural versus urban areas (need digital invoices to run businesses), there are varying levels of access to cell phones and computers, and intermediaries must be paid for access (extra costs).



3. How have Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Traditional Ecological Knowledge influenced contemporary trade practices?

The following annotated notes highlight participants' reflections on how Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) and TEK continue to shape and influence contemporary trade practices:

- TEK is dynamic — e.g., *compadrazgo* system.
- Culture includes language, ontology (the nature of being) and epistemology (theory of knowledge, way of knowing), if language disappears, knowledge also disappears, as do trade routes.
- Language is important in order to call the spirit.
- Indigenous Peoples have systems of knowledge transference across generations and inter-generations, and these have been interrupted.
- Indigenous Peoples have their own rules and regulations (natural law).
- Indigenous Knowledge has to be recognized, not just western science (or universities dictating what needs to be done in communities).
- Clear protocols are needed to define what TEK can be shared, and how it can be used, or commercialized, ensuring the Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) is respected.
- Indigenous People built systems for coffee production (such as shade coffee) that are different from those used in Brazil and Vietnam, where they destroy the jungle.

4. What opportunities exist to expand Indigenous-led trade models and perspectives, and what support is needed to strengthen the role of TEK, IKS, and Indigenous economic frameworks in today's markets?

The following annotated notes reflect participants' preliminary insights:

Core Principles of Indigenous-led Trade

- Indigenous-led trade requires moving away from extractive, profit-centered systems and toward reciprocal, relationship-based economies that are grounded in restoration, balance, and intergenerational responsibility.
- Trade has always existed among Indigenous Nations. Ancestral trade networks, guided by respect, accountability, and spiritual values, can be revitalized across borders, rooted in traditional governance and sovereignty.
- For Indigenous Peoples, trade is a relationship, not just a transaction, and must be based on trust, reciprocity, and shared responsibility for the land.
- Indigenous Peoples are not simple economic actors — they are rightsholders, defenders of land, and keepers of knowledge. Trade must reflect their unique roles and responsibilities.
- Indigenous cosmologies offer non-Western perspectives on resources — emphasizing balance, relationality, and sacredness (e.g., water as the blood of Mother Earth), and must inform trade frameworks and CEC efforts.

Opportunities to Expand Indigenous-led Trade Models

- Integrating Indigenous perspectives into trade, supports the preservation of cosmovisions, cultural continuity, languages, and sovereignty.
- Indigenous economic practices, such as textile production using natural fibers and dyes, are rich in cultural and spiritual meaning.
- Biocultural certification systems can affirm Indigenous origins and place-based identities, and offer alternatives to conventional ecological or fair-trade certifications.
- Indigenous women play a central role in traditional economies; thus gender equity and support for women entrepreneurs are key to sustaining Indigenous trade.

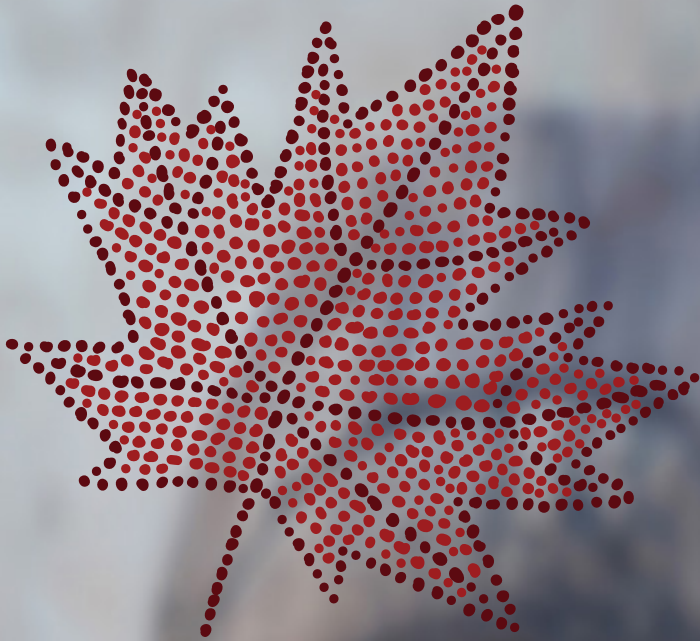
- There is an urgent need for cosmovision translators, individuals trained to bridge Indigenous and Western knowledge systems, that ensure mutual understanding and respectful exchanges.

Challenges and Gaps

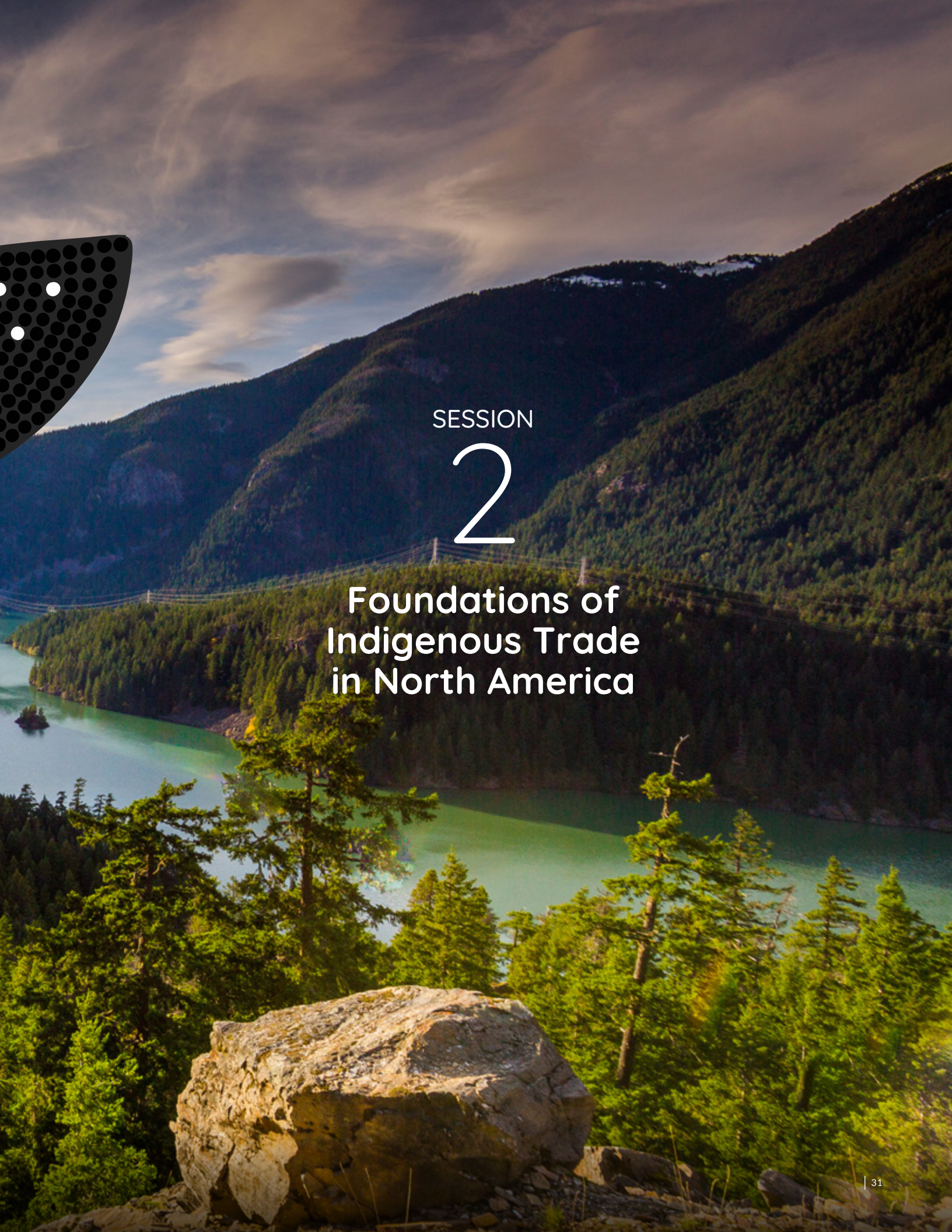
- Many Indigenous producers face logistical barriers (e.g., digital infrastructure, transportation, access to financing), and these can impose limits on participation in larger markets.
- Indigenous products often lack proper recognition or market value.
- Too often, Indigenous Knowledge is commodified without proper consultation or benefit-sharing. TEK integration must be meaningful and not extractive: clear rules, transparency, and Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) are essential.
- Climate change is already disrupting TEK systems — altering species' migration, plant growth, and related cultural practices. This underscores the urgency of protecting and adapting Indigenous Knowledge Systems.
- Many Indigenous Peoples lack access to or understanding of national and international legal frameworks that may affect their rights. A comparative compendium of laws across the three countries could support empowerment and informed action.

Support Needed

- TEK and IKS are holistic, place-based knowledge systems with ethical, spiritual, and ecological dimensions. Their use must be grounded in Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC), cultural integrity, and benefit-sharing.
- Develop clear rules and transparent processes to protect against extractive use of Indigenous Knowledge.
- Promote legal literacy by developing tools such as a comparative compendium of national and international laws across the three countries.
- Provide community-led, place-based support in the form of funding, infrastructure, training, and enabling policy environments that support Indigenous priorities and realities.
- Encourage mindset shifts among non-Indigenous partners. Engaging in Indigenous trade requires building long-term, trust-based relationships centered on respect and shared stewardship.







SESSION

2

Foundations of Indigenous Trade in North America

Summary

Before the second session began, Jorge Daniel Taillant introduced Angie Saltman (Métis Nation of Alberta), CEO of Salt Media and author of the image *Trade in Turtle Island*, which is featured in the roundtable graphics and on the cover of this document. Angie Saltman is from Treaty 8 territory in Métis District 13, based in Grand Prairie, Alberta, and is of Red River Métis descent. She shared her artwork, which represents a vision of what an Indigenous economy could look like. The piece is rooted in the concept of Turtle Island — an Indigenous origin story that refers to North America — and symbolizes how we are all connected in different directions. Within the artwork, the loon represents managers and international leaders, going out into the world to network and support one another. It captures the spirit of economic development through an Indigenous worldview: emphasizing reciprocity and giving back to the Earth.

2.1 Setting the Stage, by Kathy Hodgson-Smith (Métis, Saskatchewan), TEKEG Facilitator

Summary

Trade should not be seen solely as a commoditized system but as a tool for managing and sustaining the environment. Opening the second session, Kathy Hodgson-Smith reflected on the core principles and legal frameworks that have either supported or hindered Indigenous-developed ideas, especially around environmental stewardship. She also highlighted the need to strengthen systems of knowledge transfer, which are often disrupted. While the USMCA targets unwelcome trade practices, its implementation doesn't always align with Indigenous needs. Finally, Kathy spoke about the importance of expanding Indigenous trade networks across North America to empower Indigenous Peoples to continue moving forward on their own terms.

2.2 Open Roundtable Discussion

Summary

Knowledge is not singular, nor is it transmitted in a single direction, emphasized the participants during the discussion. It is important to map who holds knowledge and whether it is made accessible to communities. While establishing standards and regulations are necessary, they should not follow a one-size-fits-all approach;

instead, they must remain flexible and responsive to the economic realities of each community. In this context, it is essential to explore diverse voluntary mechanisms that can recognize the Traditional Knowledge behind a product. Simultaneously, mechanisms must be put in place to protect intellectual property and TEK across North America. However, caution must be taken with frameworks like the Nagoya Protocol, as they can be molded to serve individual or private interests — hence the ongoing need to empower knowledge holders.

Participants emphasized that Indigenous Knowledge is embedded in entire systems of governance, language, and worldview. TEK cannot be reduced to context or data; it must be understood through the lens of Indigenous cosmovisions, where everything is interconnected and in balance. One participant noted, “Water is not a resource — it is the blood that flows through Mother Earth.” These perspectives reflect a non-extractive relationship with nature: take only what is necessary and always give back. This ethical foundation challenges dominant economic paradigms and invites a more relational approach to trade.

The importance of understanding biodiversity beyond economic terms, was also highlighted by the participants continuing the discussion. Part of the current biodiversity crisis stems from the prevailing focus on its economic value. How can we redefine biodiversity through a different set of values? Much of what we assign value to on Earth is viewed through an anthropocentric lens. There is a pressing need to transcend commercial agreements and the commodification of land and human life. Public policy must defend biocultural diversity while reviving traditional markets and ancestral trade routes.

This requires a rethinking of language and concepts used in trade and environmental agreements. As one speaker noted, translating TEK is not merely linguistic — it is conceptual. There is a need for translators who can bridge cosmovisions, and for ethical communicators trained in both traditional and non-traditional frameworks. Moreover, Indigenous Peoples called for clear protocols to define the terms and limits of knowledge sharing, including obtaining prior, informed consent for any access or dissemination of TEK.

To translate these values into action, participants suggested the need for structural mechanisms rooted in Indigenous worldviews. Proposals included the

development of a regional assessment focused on transboundary policy options, integrating Indigenous positions, legal pluralism, and government-to-government agreements.⁴ Drawing from examples in Canadian national parks, the assessment could also examine Indigenous investment models and financial services that strengthen regional strategies and support sustainable trade. Participants stressed that TEK integration should not become an extractive burden placed on Indigenous communities without real power-sharing or respect for their legal systems. Voluntary appointments, especially within international mechanisms, must be re-evaluated to ensure Indigenous People are involved from the first draft of any trade-related policy, not just consulted later.

Furthermore, participants highlighted that the diversification of Indigenous trade partners and the inclusion of Indigenous Peoples in the implementation of trade agreements and arrangements is essential. One proposed initiative was the creation of a directory of Indigenous exporters and importers in the region, along with verification of their trading capacity by collaborating with existing organizations. However, this must go together with capacity-building efforts that include language preservation, digital access, ethical marketing support, and legal literacy. Participants noted that many Indigenous artisans lack access to branding tools, electronic payments, or intellectual property protections, which limits their ability to receive fair value for their goods. The speaker encouraged other Indigenous Peoples, especially women, to engage more actively in trade and export.

Another recurring theme was the structure of global financial mechanisms, which often reflect a deeply capitalist conception of development. Frequently, the producer is less favored than the marketer or middle person. In some cases, participants described how colonial and capitalist financial structures undermine

4 Helpful Canadian reference: CCAB. 2023. *Trading nations: Supporting international Indigenous-to-Indigenous trade policy development*. Toronto: Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business. ([Link](#)) The section on the Free Trade Agreement (p. 38) and Improving Free Trade Agreement Text (p. 39-40) provides very similar recommendations and observations as posed by the Roundtable. The second section also gives specific recommendations on strengthening texts within FTAs. Chapter 4 (p. 21) shows international examples of Indigenous Trade Policy initiatives.

local economies. One participant shared how the disappearance of a fishing tradition led not just to a change in diet but to the erosion of language and the spread of diseases like diabetes. These ripple effects highlight the need to frame Indigenous trade within broader health, ecological, and cultural systems. Thus, it is important to analyze the value chain and determine where value is being created, captured, and by whom. The participant emphasized that many experts in these areas are not in government service, where they might have more impact to address existing — and often misunderstood — inequities.

These broader reflections were grounded in lived experiences. One Indigenous participant shared his lived experience as a business owner and shed light on the differing realities of commerce in urban versus rural areas — where limited access to the Internet often hinders commercializing products. He stressed that not everyone has the advantage of a level playing field, so although Indigenous business owners may be able to read legal texts, interpreting them is not always straightforward. Another speaker noted the need for a tri-national compendium of relevant laws to help Indigenous Peoples better understand their rights and available services. Legal clarity and training are essential, as is the inclusion of food, song, and ritual in official spaces — reminders that trade is not only economic but cultural and spiritual. Another participant added that each Indigenous Nation has its own internal regulations, making it vital to connect academic research with the practical realities of local communities.

Finally, participants emphasized that...

sustainable Indigenous trade must not come at the cost of cultural erosion.

Making Indigenous Knowledge a commodity — particularly when that knowledge is divorced from its sacred context — can lead to profound ethical and spiritual harm. One participant urged that storytelling, ceremony, and language should be treated as integral elements of economic frameworks, not as “add-ons.” Another warned of the risks of TEK being used as mere “baseline data” without respect for the community processes that generate it. Trade, when grounded in Indigenous worldviews, becomes not just a transaction — but a continuation of life, law, and responsibility.

Annotated Notes

To encourage thoughtful and open dialogue, a set of four guiding questions was presented to frame the round-table discussion. These questions served as flexible prompts designed to inspire participants to share insights, experiences, and perspectives on the history, structure, and future of Indigenous trade in North America, as well as the role of IKS and international trade frameworks in fostering sustainable trade practices.

The following notes capture insights shared by participants during the open dialogue linked to each of the guiding questions.

1. What were the foundational laws that shaped Indigenous trade in North America and what should/could be their impact on broader trade practices?

The following annotated notes highlight participants' reflections on the foundational laws that have historically guided Indigenous trade in North America, and their continued relevance for shaping broader and more sustainable trade practices today:

- Creation stories give us the instruction on how to live within nature and provides us strong principles, such as reciprocity, which instruct us on rights and laws (e.g., Haudenosaunee Creation Story⁵).
- We are exceeding nature's limits and nature is not something for humans to exploit.
- Respect, balance, reciprocity — 'what can we offer versus what we can take'.
- Maintaining a relationship to all living things.
- Earth and water are not resources, this is a human-centered way of thinking.
- Sustainability is inter-generational equity.
- Don't exploit the Earth: gratitude, this has been lost in a world where only trade is important.
- There were protocols for making relationships (e.g., Blackfoot Confederacy, Buffalo Treaty).
- Consideration for all beings, is not just for humans.
- Cosmos and the Earth are sacred elements and have an intelligence superior to that of humans.
- 7-generation mindset.
- Bio-cultural erosion directly impacts the transmission of TEK / IKS.

5 Keller George. n.d. *The Haudenosaunee Creation story*. Onieda Indian Nation. ([Link](#))

2. How were Indigenous trade networks structured historically, and how did they facilitate the exchange of goods, knowledge, and culture across North America?

The following annotated notes highlight participants' reflections on how historical Indigenous trade networks were structured and how they facilitated the exchange of goods, knowledge, and culture across North America:

- Rivers were also part of trade routes.
- East to West and North to South, trade has been happening for a long time.
- Seeds were traded (for instance, quinoa found in Ontario in 2019⁶ shows connection to southern tribes) and knowledge was exchanged with the seeds.
- Indigenous kinship ties went beyond colonial borders but are not recognized today.
- The bulbs of the Camas Lilly (found in Garry Oak ecosystems of the West Coast) were a food staple, harvested by women and traded and were the most traded food items next to Pacific salmon. Other food items traded between coastal and interior Indigenous Peoples were cranberries and blueberries.
 - + Camas lilies were associated with language, belief systems, songs, stories and social structures.
 - + External impacts on those ecosystems which decreased the harvest and trade of the Camas lily, also decreased the role of women.
- The Indigenous market in North America needs to be revived — e.g., the Jade route, fur markets.
- Indigenous Peoples co-existed with the buffalo on the Plains. The animals were the main source of the economy, the center of the people's seasonal activities, and were of cultural, spiritual and ecological significance.
- Resource-sharing with other Indigenous communities required protocols and ceremonies.

6 University of Toronto. January 15, 2019. *U of T researchers identify domesticated 3,000-year-old quinoa seeds in Ontario*. ([Link](#))

3. What role can international trade agreements play in supporting Indigenous trade initiatives and ensuring sustainable trade practices across borders?

The following annotated notes reflect participants' reflections on the opportunities and challenges involved in aligning international trade agreements with Indigenous trade initiatives and cross-border sustainability practices:

- We need to enable Indigenous-led trade policies and mechanisms that complement development. (e.g., *Iroquois Caucus signs Trade and Commerce Protocol Agreement* ^{7,8})
- Include Indigenous languages and concepts in trade agreements.
- Incentive structures: creating fiscal policies that reinvest in forests and ecosystems, incentives for Indigenous Peoples, acknowledge the restorative work being done in communities
- Model investment or trade treaties
 - + Green energy and sustainable investment space
 - + Advocacy tools
 - + Provisions and preamble that discusses relational versus liberal economy, relationships to land and Earth
 - + e.g., EAC Investment Model Treaty⁹
- USMCA Article 32 addition — adds provisions on technological transfer and support for Indigenous Peoples in each Nation/State.
- World Trade Organization has ignored Indigenous rights. Does the CEC play a role at this level?

7 Mohawk Council of Kahnawà:ke. April 24, 2025. *Iroquois Caucus signs Trade and Commerce Protocol Agreement*. ([Link](#))

8 Grounded in the inherent right of Haudenosaunee people to freely cross the Canada-US border and maintain trade and cultural ties across their territories, the Agreement seeks to revitalize traditional trade relationships and promote cooperation based on shared values of peace, power, and a good mind. The Agreement was signed by representatives from all six participating Iroquois Caucus communities: the Six Nations Council, the Mohawk Council of Akwesasne, the Mohawk Council of Kanehsatà:ke, the Mohawk Council of Tyendinaga, the Oneida Council, and the Mohawk Council of Kahnawà:ke.

9 East African Community. 2016. *The EAC Model Investment Treaty*. Electronic Database of Investment Treaties. ([Link](#))

- The Canada — Ecuador Free trade Agreement includes a chapter on identifying and reducing a trade barrier that Indigenous Peoples face and includes a commitment to enforce, not weaken, domestic laws and protections on Indigenous Peoples' rights to attract trade and investment.¹⁰ Criticisms of the Agreement state that it will harm the rights and ways of life of Indigenous Peoples and it faces opposition from Ecuador's largest Indigenous organization. The country's Indigenous Nation also faces human rights abuses from Canadian mining companies.¹¹
- Reference points for policy work on Indigenous Knowledge (including Traditional Ecological Knowledge), biodiversity and other values:
 - + Convention of Biological Diversity, Article 8(j) Traditional Knowledge, Innovation & Practices¹²
This article sets out specific tasks to ensure the meaningful contribution of Indigenous Peoples and local communities toward the three objectives of the Convention: a) the conservation of biological diversity, b) the sustainable use of biological diversity, and c) the fair and equitable sharing of benefits, as well as the implementation of the Kunming Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework. Through this programme, the rights, contributions and traditional knowledge of Indigenous Peoples and local communities are further embedded in the global agenda.

10 Government of Canada. January 2025. *Canada-Ecuador Free Trade Agreement: Summary of negotiated outcomes*. ([Link](#))

11 Amnesty International Canada. February 10, 2025. *Joint statement on announcement of Canada-Ecuador Free Trade Agreement*. ([Link](#))

12 Convention on Biological Diversity. n.d. *Article 8(j) - Traditional Knowledge, Innovations and Practices*. ([Link](#))



- + These voluntary guidelines can help us understand how to protect and acknowledge Indigenous Knowledge related to certain products.
- + The Nagoya Protocol¹³ — The *Nagoya Protocol on Access to Genetic Resources and the Fair and Equitable Sharing of Benefits arising from their Utilization, to the Convention on Biological Diversity*, is an international agreement which fosters sharing the benefits arising from the utilization of genetic resources in a fair and equitable way. The Nagoya Protocol addresses traditional knowledge associated with genetic resources with provisions on access, benefit-sharing and compliance. It also addresses genetic resources where indigenous and local communities have the established right to grant access to them. Contracting Parties are to take measures to ensure these communities' prior informed consent, and fair and equitable benefit-sharing, keeping in mind community laws and procedures as well as customary use and exchange.
- + CEC Traditional Ecological Knowledge Principles
- + UNDRIP — Free, Prior & Informed Consent, Articles 3,20,21, 23, 36, Articles 25, 29 (environmental protection, connection to land)
- Climate change needs to be integrated into trade agreements and the encouragement of sustainable practices.
- Nature, culture and knowledge are inter-related, and all values go beyond a trade agreement. They must be within the awareness of life: one cannot have Indigenous trade if biocultural landscapes are disappearing, so we need other mechanisms beyond trade.
- Countries need public policies to defend bio-cultural memory or protect bio-cultural heritage. (Examples of National and Local Policy and Law for Protecting Biocultural Heritage.¹⁴)
- Trade agreements should include something on technology transfer, and standard formats.
- Note examples of cooperative governance that's working, inter-community, ancestral trade.
- National Indigenous Economic Development Board¹⁵ (Canada) — advises on trade and export, and on trade agreements, Indigenous trade missions.

13 Secretariat of the CBD. 2021. *Nagoya Protocol on Access to Genetic Resources and the Fair and Equitable Sharing of Benefits Arising from Their Utilization to the Convention on Biological Diversity: Text and Annex*. Montreal: Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity. ([Link](#))

14 International Institute for Environment and Development. n.d. *Biocultural Heritage: Policy and law*. ([Link](#))

15 The national Indigenous Economic Development Board ([Link](#))

4. In what ways can IKS and TEK inform sustainable trade practices and resource management in North America?

The following annotated notes capture key insights shared by participants on the ways in which IKS and TEK can inform sustainable trade practices and resource management in North America:

- Move toward an economy in which sustainable trade and resources are managed responsibly.
- Ethical space framework¹⁶ — A framework in which worldviews are brought together, advancing legal pluralism and government to government agreements, and subjugating state decision-making without fettering the colonial decision maker (e.g., Haida Agreement in British Columbia¹⁷).
 - + Legally pluralistic tables help to define regional opportunities (bringing together governments — e.g., watershed roundtables such as the Flathead Basin Commission in northwestern Montana).
 - + What it means for economics — provide for cultural sustainability, economic development for Indigenous communities and settler communities.
- Indigenous People need to be part of the design of the trade policy development from its first draft: Indigenous People have the lived experience and cultural knowledge and worldview, unlike some academics or other non-Indigenous experts.

16 AER. 2017. *Voices of understanding: Looking through the window*. Calgary: Alberta Energy Regulator. ([Link](#)) & Willie Ermine. 2007. The ethical space of engagement. In *Indigenous Law Journal*, Vol. 6, Issue 1. 193–203. Toronto: University of Toronto, Faculty of Law. ([Link](#))

17 Government of British Columbia. 2025. *Provincial Agreement on Haida Aboriginal Title*. ([Link](#))



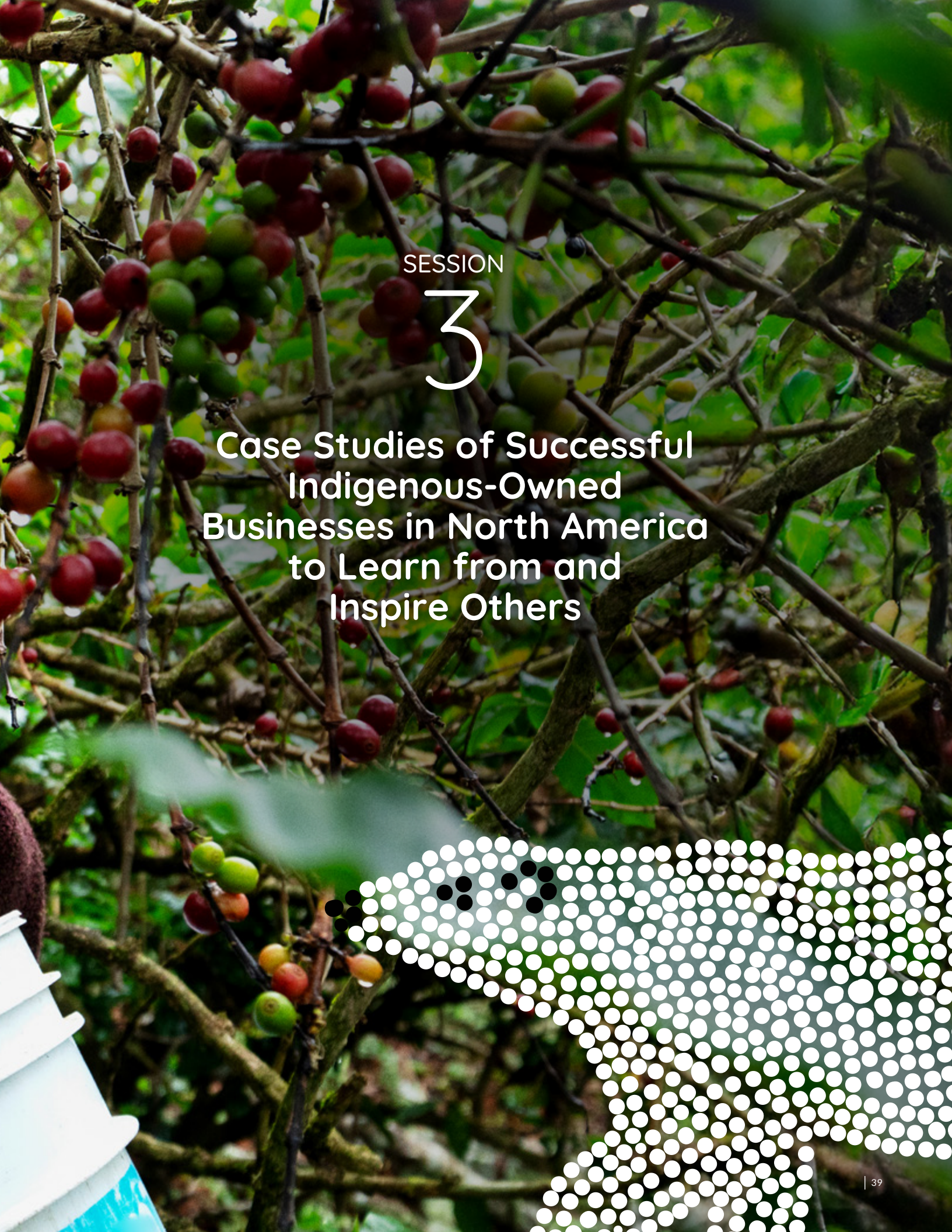
Day 1 Closing Comments

by Octaviana V. Trujillo (Yaqui, Arizona)
and Kathy Hodgson-Smith (Métis, Saskatchewan)

Summary

To conclude the first day of reflection and conversation, Kathy Hodgson-Smith thanked participants for their energy and contributions. Octaviana V. Trujillo closed the session by highlighting the progress made with the establishment and enactment of cutting-edge protections. However, she noted the significant gap in educating Indigenous Peoples about their rights under these provisions. She also recognized the trailblazing role of Indigenous Peoples and culturally focused small/medium enterprises, emphasizing their vital contribution to advancing sustainable Indigenous trade opportunities.



The background of the slide is a close-up photograph of a coffee branch with many small, round coffee cherries in various stages of ripeness, from green to bright red. The branches are dark and woody. In the bottom right corner, there is a large, stylized graphic of the map of North America, composed of a grid of white dots of varying sizes, creating a halftone effect. The map is positioned over the lower right portion of the coffee branch image.

SESSION

3

Case Studies of Successful
Indigenous-Owned
Businesses in North America
to Learn from and
Inspire Others

3.1 Case Study from Canada, presented by Gwen Bridge (Saddle Lake Cree Nation, Alberta)

Summary

Current transboundary policies often fall short in recognizing and upholding Indigenous sovereignty and rights — an urgent gap underscored by Gwen Bridge (Saddle Lake Cree Nation, Alberta), CEO and Founder of Gwen Bridge Consulting, in her case study presentation during the session. Her presentation centered on how to begin framing the opportunities that are presented in policy options documents. As the current Coordinating Lead Author of the *Transboundary Policy Options* chapter of the Biodiversity Climate Change Assessment (BCCA), she sought to explore what policy options can be helpful, within the transboundary trade context.

Indigenous contributors to the chapter criticized its failure to address Indigenous sovereignty and rights within a transboundary context. One example she offered, highlighting both the complexities and the current knowledge gaps, was: “What impact do US federal tribal water rights have, in the context of Canadian Federal government treaty negotiations, over obligations to meet those water quality rights — particularly when tribes are transboundary and have the same water quality rights?”

The assessment also includes guidance, for all chapters and authors, on Indigenous Knowledge. One influential report that has shaped this assessment is the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), which advocated for a transformative change of governance. Essentially it said, “a change in our governance mechanism is essential for meaningful action.” The key foundational principles to consider are, “equity and justice, pluralism and inclusion, reciprocal and respectful human nature relationships, and adaptive learning and action.”

Annotated Notes

- Work underway to understand the linkages between biodiversity and climate change, sovereignty and rights of Indigenous People, have relevance to freshwater, groundwater, terrestrial — importance of listening to what Indigenous People are saying, and empower Indigenous jurisdiction to make decisions over their lands.
- Conservation Finance (e.g., Multilateral financing instruments: Tropical Forest Forever Facility,¹⁸ Great Bear Rainforest Circular Economies¹⁹)
- Exploring options of how to advance Indigenous management of land and exercising Indigenous laws, looking at Indigenous-led policies, like the Buffalo Treaty.

¹⁸ Government of Brazil. 2024. *The Tropical Forests Forever Facility: A proposed multilateral investment fund to reward tropical forest conservation and restoration*. The Global Foundation. ([Link](#))

¹⁹ Nature United. n.d. *Indigenous-led Conservation – Great Bear Rainforest: Investing in Local Economies*. ([Link](#))





3.2 Case Study from Mexico²⁰, presented by Jorge Ramírez Pech (Mayan, from Mexico)

Summary

How do we enable small producers to tell their stories? Jorge Ramírez Pech (Mayan, from Mexico), Director of abejasmiel.com, presented the case study from Mexico. He is a primary producer of honey from native stingless bees — a product that remains largely unknown in mainstream markets. While there are over 20,000 species of bees worldwide, not all produce honey; however, all play a vital role in pollination. Among them, the most recognized is *Apis mellifera*, a species not native to this continent but introduced to the Americas by Europeans around 500 years ago.

By contrast, *Melipona beecheii*, a stingless bee, has been cultivated by the Maya people since at least 300 BC. These native bees, known as meliponines, produce a unique type of honey with valuable medicinal and antimicrobial properties. Their honey is higher in moisture, which naturally leads to fermentation. Upon opening, it may produce alcohol and even foam, requiring special handling, similar to that craft beer production.

20 Jorge Ramírez Pech, n.d. *Abejas y miel de meliponas, y otras abejas que no conoces* [Melipona bees and their honey, and other bees you don't know]. ([Link](#))

Despite its cultural and ecological value, Melipona honey faces several challenges. First, there is a lack of awareness: most people are unfamiliar with native stingless bees and the honey they produce. Without public knowledge about their existence, communities can't protect them or appreciate their ecological and cultural importance. Second is market domination by *Apis mellifera*, due to its larger colonies and greater honey yield, which often pushes out native alternatives. Third are significant regulatory gaps. As of 2020, Mexico's legal definition of "honey" recognizes only *Apis* honey. There is no official term for stingless bee honey, which prevents producers from exporting or certifying their product. Fourth, access to information remains limited: most of the scientific literature is in English and behind paywalls, making it inaccessible to many local producers. Lastly, climate change poses an increasing threat: rising temperatures are causing increased mortality among stingless bee populations.

To preserve and promote stingless bee honey, several actions are needed. Social media and public outreach must be leveraged to educate communities and consumers. Information must be made accessible for dissemination — especially for youth and rural producers — by translating complex science into plain language. National and international regulatory frameworks must evolve to formally recognize and protect stingless bees and their honey. Finally, emerging technologies to support sustainable production must be affordable and available, ensuring that small producers are not left behind.

Annotated Notes

- In the Yucatán peninsula and other regions, the Mayans managed the meliponas (stingless bees, specifically *Melipona beecheii*) on a large scale, for production of honey, wax and other materials, including production of resin that has antimicrobial properties, and melapone honey that has anti-cancer properties.
- Management by the Mayans has resulted in better health for the stingless bees.
- The honeybee (*Apis mellifera*) was introduced when the Spanish arrived and was favoured over *Melipona beecheii* because of its greater production of honey (30-60 kg /colony/year versus 4-6 kg /colony/year).
- Honey was traded with other regions and used in traditional medicine, as well as wax and resins which were used in the manufacture of handicrafts and tools.
- Barriers to honey businesses:
 - + Inequitable access to the Internet — Producers often need to travel far to access Internet (communities are remote from urban areas), also translation of printed materials into English is expensive, although producers need to generate publicity to market their honey.
 - + Inequitable access to information — Extra costs are generated for translation of English scientific articles to Spanish or to Indigenous languages. Producers also need access to practical information (such as translation from scientific articles).
 - + Access to training — Social media and communications and marketing, can require training, as well as for generation of online content, use of social media to reach consumers, and being aware of laws and regulations, standards, and the permits and licences needed for their businesses, as well as other financial considerations (surtaxes, tariffs, bonds for transboundary travel).
 - + Competing with big companies — Indigenous-made products are time-consuming to produce because producers are following Indigenous laws, knowledge, and also working on the land.
 - + Product definitions (e.g., definition of honey) — Trade policies recognize only honey from honeybees.
 - + How do we enable small producers to tell their stories? (e.g., The story that coffee, cacao were born in Mexico.)

3.3 Case Study from the United States presented by James C. Hopkins (Algonquin/Métis from Quebec)

Summary

How do Indigenous Peoples fit into the international trade system? Answering this question is a key challenge in today's global economy and was the focus of the third case study presented by James C. Hopkins (Algonquin/Métis from Quebec), Associate Clinical Professor at the Indigenous Peoples Law and Policy Program, Affiliated Professor of American Indian Studies and Latin American Studies, University of Arizona Law School.

With the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) up for renewal, this question becomes even more urgent. While the current agreement includes Articles 26-32, which recognizes Indigenous rights, these protections have yet to be meaningfully implemented.

Indigenous nations often span borders — Thirty federally recognized US tribes are divided across international lines — which creates real barriers to trade. While international trade frameworks favor large corporations, Indigenous producers face added layers of regulation, costs, and exclusion.

The Tohono O'odham Nation, for example, utilizes tomatoes rejected by the USDA, and turns them into compost which they sell to meet a growing demand. Still, Indigenous small and medium-size enterprises are not operating on a level playing field.

Similarly, the Pascua Yaqui Tribe and Río Yaqui pueblos have entered into a cross-border trade agreement supported by the state of Sonora and Mexico's federal government. They have also worked with the US government to secure mobility rights for cultural, health, and ceremonial reasons. While progress is happening and is promising, the right to binational trade remains inconsistently applied.

Indigenous goods — like coffee — are often commodified without respect for their cultural significance. At the border, value is assessed only by market price. Tariffs are applied based on what the final seller pays, leaving producers with little or no profit. None of this tax revenue is redistributed to the Indigenous communities producing the goods. Furthermore, once trade volume grows, customs may require bonds and brokers, creating yet another barrier. These rules changed during the transition from NAFTA to USMCA — without informing Indigenous traders.

In 2023, the Yaqui Justice Plan was announced in coordination with Mexico's federal government. On September 27, 2024, President Claudia Sheinbaum reaffirmed support. The plan includes the Pascua Yaqui as official signatories and affirms collective rights — to land, water, air, and even access to Wi-Fi and the electromagnetic spectrum. The agreement also recognizes the right of outside organizations to support and intervene, offering Indigenous communities' tools for protection and accountability.

Annotated Notes

- The modern trade system does not account for the cultural meaning of Indigenous goods.
- There's so much that goes into what an Indigenous producer creates or grows (i.e., investment in production).
- *The Compost Cats Initiative* (University of Arizona), is an example of an initiative created to solve an existing problem that affects Indigenous communities, creates compost out of residential bio-organic material which is disposed of near the community. If trucks don't pass the food and safety inspection, they dump their holds at the community (mainly organic produce from Mexico). The compost is then sold and is in high demand.
- Transboundary agreements — Agreements of understanding between Canada and the US allow for free, safe passage of their people for ceremonies, health and well-being, and cultural reasons. These policies could be explored, as well as ceremonial items and goods that have been given in the presence of tribal members.
- Goods could also bypass the US by traveling by sea from Mexico to Canada.







SESSION

4

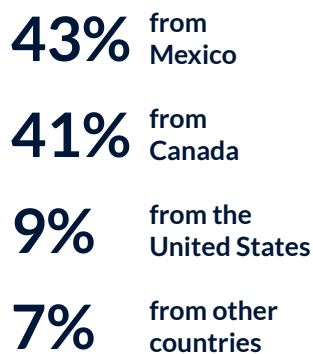
Barriers and Opportunities
to Support Indigenous-Owned
Businesses and Sustainable
Trade from Coast to Coast to
Coast (Public session)

4.1 Opening Remarks by Octaviana V. Trujillo (Yaqui, Arizona)

Summary

Octaviana V. Trujillo, JPAC member and former Chairwoman of the Pascua Yaqui Tribe of Arizona, began by welcoming the audience and thanking Indigenous artist Angie Saltman for creating the webinar's image "Trade in Turtle Island". Trujillo explained that, in the previous three sessions, the group of Indigenous experts, researchers, conservation practitioners, as well as the TEKEG and JPAC members, had discussed how Indigenous values, relational approaches, TEK, cultural heritage, nature-based solutions, and the revitalization of Indigenous trade can advance sustainable trade in North America.

An online poll showed that online participants were:



4.2 Conclusions on Opportunities and Barriers faced by Indigenous-owned Businesses across North America, by Theresa Aslin Fresco (Lake Babine Nation, British Columbia) and Mindahi Bastida (Otomi-Toltec, Mexico)

Summary

Theresa Aslin Fresco began by reflecting on a world where the revitalization and leadership of Indigenous trade would be possible. She explained the importance of contextual elements, particularly the systemic barriers that hinder Indigenous leadership:

The economic and trade systems, of which we are a part, have a colonial legacy rooted in dispossession of land and resource extraction without the inclusion or consent of Indigenous Peoples. This approach has long neglected Indigenous worldviews, ethics, and deep cultural relationships with land, water, and all species. As such, a paradigm shift is essential, the current direction fails to ensure the health of ecosystems, upon which all depend. Mechanisms and instruments like the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) are necessary, but full implementation remains incomplete.

Building on this remarks, Mindahi Bastida (Otomi-Toltec, Mexico), Founder and Convenor at The Earth Elders, emphasized that Indigenous Nations hold essential knowledge for survival, as their connection to the earth is based on sacred relationships rather than hierarchical control. He explained that as People of the Corn in Mesoamerica, the relationship with corn is viewed as one between beings; however, the commodification of corn illustrates the broader issue of how Indigenous relationships with the natural world are often misunderstood and exploited. Nation-states continue perpetuating colonial mindsets through regimes designed to dominate territory, creating barriers that further erode biocultural diversity.



Annotated Notes

Among the key contextual elements emphasized by Theresa Fresco and Mindahi Bastida are the following:

- It's important to recognize the economic and trade systems, in which we currently operate, were not created for Indigenous Peoples. These colonial settler systems were aimed at dispossessing Indigenous Peoples from their lands, which has led to the disruption of their cultural, social and economic systems, including trade. Laws and policies developed under these systems continue to affect Indigenous communities today, with the degradation of the lands and waters in their territories furthering bio-cultural erosion.
- It is also important to recognize the rights of Indigenous Peoples to their own cultures, languages, governance over their territories, and economic development, as articulated in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. This includes Free, Prior and Informed Consent to all decisions affecting their territories and ways of life. (There is "nothing about us, without us, or being led by us.")
- Work to advance Indigenous trade will require a paradigm shift. A reimagining of the economic and trade models, from one of uninhibited growth, to one of restoration, reciprocity, respect, and a relationship embracing Indigenous worldviews and ways of knowing.

After setting the context, Theresa Fresco and Mindahi Bastida shared their key insights and conclusions, organized into two interconnected sections — Opportunities and Barriers — offering a comprehensive overview of both the challenges and potential pathways for Indigenous-owned businesses across North America.

Opportunities

Summary

The need to shift from competition to collaboration, based on mutual respect and shared responsibility across North America was emphasized by Mindahi Bastida as he responded to Theresa Fresco's invitation to share opportunities identified for Indigenous businesses during the previous discussions. He began by acknowledging the CEC, for its role in bringing together public, governmental, and Indigenous Nations and Peoples, underscoring the importance of fostering unity and cooperation to advance sustainable and inclusive economic development.

Proposals [to support Indigenous-owned businesses and sustainable trade across North America] included creating a biocultural label or seal for products and services that have originated from Indigenous Peoples and their local communities across the region. Promoting networks of Indigenous businesses that unite local communities and Indigenous Peoples is also essential, along with fostering fair-trade synergies through direct participation of these businesses. Leveraging binding international legal instruments, such as the *Convention on Biological Diversity*, *International Labour Organization's Convention 169*, the *Nagoya Protocol*, and the work of the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), will be crucial to enhance the growth of Indigenous businesses. Recognizing legal pluralism by valuing customary and traditional Indigenous laws alongside national and international laws is equally important.

Establishing legally recognized networks and alliances will empower Indigenous businesses and provide legal certainty. Encouraging ancestral trade through traditional markets, routes, and exchanges that honor cultural heritage, such as the jade route, turquoise route, and fur route, will offer substantial opportunities for Indigenous businesses and biocultural territories. Moving beyond free trade, which has often contributed to the erosion of local economies, requires reclaiming the exchange of goods, services, and ideas that reflect the spirit of the people.

North America has the potential to lead these initiatives by developing biocultural protocols that strengthen Indigenous businesses throughout the region. Harmonizing international legal instruments and mechanisms to support collective businesses across Mexico, the United States, and Canada are vital. Public policies that protect memory, heritage, and biocultural diversity can bolster Indigenous initiatives and businesses. Partnerships between societies, companies that respect life, and institutional arrangements within the USMCA could provide affirmative support for Indigenous trade, as seen in Canada's negotiation of a free trade agreement with Ecuador, which includes a chapter on Indigenous Issues.

Annotated Notes

The annotated notes below present the key opportunities highlighted by Theresa Fresco and Mindahi Bastida.

- Build capacity through a training and Indigenous business program — Such a program could provide access to training, technology (e.g., Internet, cell phones, computers) and infrastructure needed for Indigenous businesses. Training is needed in areas such as laws/regulations/policies, intellectual property, communications and marketing, social media, permits, standards and certifications.
- Creation of an Indigenous trade network/chamber/association — An Indigenous international network for trade would allow Indigenous businesses and producers to connect and it could be a hub for relationship building and resource sharing. The network could also develop information or a directory on what commodities and types of Indigenous trade are happening in Canada, US and Mexico.
- Funding — Provision of capacity building funding for Indigenous Peoples would allow them to participate in gatherings, such as the Indigenous trade roundtable, policy discussions, etc., as well as funding to stay in Indigenous communities that would support local businesses (e.g., carbon funds — empower Indigenous communities to own and manage carbon projects, ensuring that they benefit).
- Funding and Support for Women in Trade — Funding would support businesses led by Indigenous women-led (e.g., Matriarch Fund led by Native Women Lead²¹).
- Indigenous leadership in the development of trade policies, institutional development and mechanisms that complement development — Create spaces for Indigenous worldviews, perspectives and leadership from initial draft to implementation. (e.g., recognition of Indigenous systems of trade, such as the *compadrazgo*/bartering system, and learning from Indigenous-led agreements, such as the *Trade and Commerce Protocol Agreement*, signed by the Iroquois Caucus²²)
- Bring decision-makers into Indigenous communities — This could help to show the local context and meet Indigenous business champions at the community level and demonstrate Indigenous values and laws.

21 Native Women Lead. n.d. *Matriarch Funds*. ([Link](#))

22 Mohawk Council of Kahnawà:ke. April 24, 2025. *Iroquois Caucus signs Trade and Commerce Protocol Agreement*. ([Link](#))

- Bio-cultural indicators in assessments — To protect bio-cultural memory and diversity, indicators need to be created and incorporated into baselines and assessments that consider cumulative impact of multiple projects and impacts on the land and water (personhood status of nature). Trade success measures should align with well-being indicators.
- Indigenous Product Certification/Label/Stamp — This could promote Indigenous products and a mechanism to protect and recognize Indigenous Knowledge
 - + Examples: New Zealand's Local Contexts,²³ Traditional Knowledge Labels, Biocultural Labels
 - + Canada's National Indigenous Economic Development Board — verification process for Indigenous businesses
- Certification of Origin for Exemption — This might provide certified origin from an Indigenous community to be eligible for exemptions from surtaxes, tariffs, etc. (e.g., China assembles air conditioning units in Mexico and ships them into the US to avoid 15-20% tariffs)

Barriers

Summary

TEK cannot be separated from the people, communities, languages, and ontologies to which it belongs. Theresa Fresco highlighted this foundational principle when addressing the barriers to its protection and recognition. She emphasized that Traditional Ecological Knowledge is intricately woven into arts, crafts, products, and practices, underscoring the importance of safeguarding intellectual property rights to prevent exploitation and ensure that this knowledge remains with its rightful communities. Adding to this perspective, Mindahi Bastida pointed out that current intellectual property frameworks primarily serve corporate interests rather than collective rights. This imbalance, he explained, has contributed to the global dispossession of medicinal knowledge and TEK, where ancestral wisdom has been appropriated and patented without consent.

23 Local Contexts is a global initiative supporting Indigenous communities in reasserting their cultural authority in collections and data. It focuses on Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP) and Indigenous Data Sovereignty, helping communities manage and control their cultural heritage, environmental data, and genetic resources within digital environments. also provides tools and resources to facilitate this, including labels and notices to acknowledge Indigenous knowledge and data sources. See: ([Link](#))

Mindahi Bastida advocated for a shift from extraction to collaboration, emphasizing the importance of collective institutional arrangements that recognize Indigenous Peoples as holders and caretakers of vital knowledge and genetics, crucial to many industries. The Nagoya Protocol plays a significant role in affirming this recognition, particularly by emphasizing consent-based processes such as FPIC. Defining consent within the context of cultural and spiritual significance is essential to ensuring respectful sharing of knowledge with other entities.

Mindahi Bastida also addressed the critical issue of biocultural erosion, which encompasses barriers to preserving biocultural memory and diversity. These challenges stem from systems that fail to acknowledge ecological health limitations or the interconnectedness of nature and culture. He noted that throughout history, half of the world's languages have been lost and every day, species and cultures disappear due to a lack of recognition of this connection. He urged North America to lead by example in supporting public policies that protect biocultural memory and diversity. Developing national policies with this aim, and reaching agreements among Canada, Mexico, and the United States, could serve as a model for others.

Theresa Fresco then noted that Indigenous communities often face limited access to critical infrastructure and technology, and this is particularly true with the Internet. High costs, geographic isolation, slow speeds, and the predominance of English-language content, all contribute to unequal access. Similarly, training opportunities are not always accessible to Indigenous communities, due to costs or lack of localized training efforts. She stressed the importance of making training more accessible within communities, led by community members themselves to build local capacity and leadership, rather than relying solely on external experts.

Financial support is a critical area requiring attention, as less than 1% of climate change funding currently reaches Indigenous Peoples. And often, intermediaries reduce the financial benefits available to producers. Ensuring financial support for small and medium-size Indigenous businesses is essential for equitable participation in broader markets. Additionally, there are challenges related to existing laws and regulations, including permits and standardization policies that are often applied universally without consideration of Indigenous perspectives or participation.

She emphasized the importance of involving Indigenous Peoples in policy-making processes, from the outset. The principle of “nothing about us without us” should guide all development of laws, regulations, and permitting processes. Indigenous Peoples must be included in the co-development of frameworks to ensure that policies are accessible, affordable, and genuinely beneficial to their communities.

Annotated Notes

The following annotated notes summarize the main elements highlighted by Theresa Fresco and Mindahi Bastida regarding the barriers faced by Indigenous-owned businesses:

- Bio-cultural erosion — Indigenous culture and ways of life are inextricably linked with the land, water, and all living things. Environmental degradation, biodiversity loss, and climate change disproportionately impact Indigenous livelihoods and knowledge systems. Thus ecosystem health must be considered in trade decisions.
- Inequitable access to training, technology and infrastructure
 - + In rural areas, the Internet is typically difficult to access or has low connectivity, and additional costs are incurred for small Indigenous producers/business owners who need to travel to urban areas or pay intermediaries. Furthermore, Internet sites are typically in English and additional costs are needed for translation from Indigenous languages.
 - + Other technologies, such as cell phones and computers, may also be harder to access in rural areas.
 - + Training is needed for Indigenous business owners in areas involving laws/regulations/policies, intellectual property, communications and marketing, social media, permits, standards and certifications.
- Competitive disadvantage for Small Indigenous Small/Medium-size Enterprises — Indigenous products that align with Indigenous Knowledge and natural laws take longer to produce and do so at a smaller scale (‘every colour, flower, animal, has a meaning and connected to a cosmivision’). This makes it difficult to compete with bigger companies, since the value of Indigenous Knowledge is not reflected in its valuation. As well It is difficult to access international markets.

- Indigenous Knowledge appropriation and misuse — Indigenous Knowledge (IK) and Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) are embedded in Indigenous laws, languages, ontologies and epistemologies and cannot be extracted from Indigenous communities and governance systems. When it is used to grow or create products IK and TEK needs to be protected. However, this is not currently recognized in intellectual property laws (e.g., trademarks, patents, copyrights) or the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO). Penalties for IK/TEK appropriation need to be developed and enforced.
- Inclusion in trade law/policy/agreement development and implementation — Indigenous Peoples, especially Indigenous women, need to lead and be part of the development of laws, policies, agreements, treaties and permitting systems related to trade. It is critical that these mechanisms reflect Indigenous worldviews and perspectives, from the drafting stage to implementation.
- Gender equity — Indigenous women play a fundamental role in communities, and involvement with knowledge, knowledge transmission and trade networks. Strategies are needed to help Indigenous women be involved in law/policy/agreement development, as well as to access and fully benefit from trade opportunities.
- Lack of access to funding and financial services — Indigenous businesses typically have limited access to financing (e.g., government loans) or assistance from banking institutions or funding organizations. Services are often not tailored to the unique needs of Indigenous businesses and producers.

4.3 Dialogue and Question and Answer Sections on Future Actionable Strategies to Support the Growth of Indigenous Businesses and Strengthen Trade Networks Rooted in Indigenous Values and Sustainability, Moderated by Kathy Hodgson-Smith (Métis, Saskatchewan)

Summary

Indigenous Peoples are poised to play a crucial role in leading the efforts toward living in harmony with nature. However, defining that role demands both innovative thinking and strategic foresight,” stated Kathy Hodgson-Smith. She emphasized that the current environmental trajectory is unsustainable and stressed the need to shift our approaches. Pointing to mechanisms already in place, she asked participants a critical question: *Should Indigenous businesses work within existing systems, adapt to them, or create parallel structures that better support their growth and opportunities?*

Opening the floor to this discussion, Samantha Gagnon shared contributions from online participants. One participant underscored the importance of strengthening decision-making capacity within Indigenous communities in Mexico, enabling them to negotiate on a more equal footing. Another suggested that protecting medicinal plants and traditional agricultural practices could be supported through the creation of an international standard — one that prevents the misappropriation of Indigenous Knowledge.

JPAC member Elizabeth Whitsitt offered forward-looking suggestions, emphasizing the need for strategic dialogue around global trade agreements to address persistent barriers. She proposed that any future renegotiation of the USMCA should deliberately incorporate language that reflects Indigenous worldviews and supports cooperative governance — bringing together Indigenous communities, municipalities, provincial and state authorities, and federal governments. She also pointed to growing momentum around intercommunity trade and advocated for the development of recommendations that recognize and respect ancestral trade practices.



Kerry-Ann Charles (Anishinaabekwe [Anishinaabe woman] from Georgina Island First Nation), Newfoundland), participating online, reinforced that the long-standing principle of “nothing about us without us” has now evolved into “nothing about us that isn’t led by us.” Similarly, Steve DeRoy (Anishinaabe/Saulteaux people of the Ebb and Flow First Nation on West side of Lake Manitoba, signatory of Treaty 2) highlighted the systemic barriers that continue to hinder Indigenous-owned businesses across North America. He called for dedicated investment and structural support for Indigenous economies, urging companies in Canada, the United States, and Mexico to adapt their supply chains and develop Indigenous procurement strategies. De Roy also stressed the role of financial institutions in reducing barriers to capital, supporting financial literacy, and advancing capacity-building initiatives to foster equitable economic opportunities.

A live public poll posed the question:

What is the biggest barrier to Indigenous-owned business growth in North America?”

The top responses were telling:

- 35%** of participants identified systemic barriers,
- 22%** pointed to a lack of recognition of Indigenous economic frameworks, and
- 21%** cited limited access to capital.

The conversation then turned to the role of constitutional reforms in fostering a more favorable landscape for Indigenous businesses. Alina Santiago (Zapotec from the community of Ixtlán de Juárez, Oaxaca, Mexico), who participated in the full roundtable, noted that recent reforms to Article 2 of Mexico’s Constitution have introduced complex fiscal policies that Indigenous Peoples must navigate to participate in national and international trade. She explained that this transition requires Indigenous communities to obtain formal legal recognition — a process that remains challenging. Santiago underscored the need for tailored training, the involvement of Indigenous professionals, and partnerships with universities and subject-matter experts to help bridge the gap.

Annotated Notes

The following annotated notes capture key reflections, proposals, and strategic ideas shared during the open dialogue. These insights expand on themes discussed throughout the roundtable and point to practical next steps for supporting Indigenous-led trade rooted in cultural values, ancestral knowledge, and sustainability. They also highlight potential areas where the CEC and other institutions can provide meaningful support in partnership with Indigenous communities.

- Principled approach — Reciprocity, respect for nature, Indigenous rights, sustainability, dignified life, cosmovision of Indigenous Peoples, living in harmony with Mother Earth, need over commerce.
- Historic relationships — Exploring the history of the networks, what were we trading and when, what does that look like in the modern day, how could we promote small Indigenous craftpersons across the continent without getting entangled in barriers, need to bring together Knowledge Holders to speak to historic relationships and trade routes
- How can we get involved in the current trade network — Make space for Indigenous business, model chapters, terms and preambles, getting involved in the small, medium-size enterprise section, how to get certified (training and education), ensuring we look at the role of women (important in Indigenous trade), maybe coincide with Indigenous foods
- Potential areas CEC can support:
 - + Host a network of Indigenous People involved in trade
 - + Gather Knowledge Holders to speak to historic relationships, alliances, trade routes
 - + Host a series of short sessions — e.g., Buffalo Treaty (N-S, E-W routes), highlight women in Indigenous trade
 - + Building a movement — strategic planning, grassroots movement-building, mapping networks
 - + Next CEC meeting — have an Indigenous side workshop



4.4

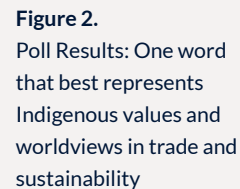
Closing of the Public Session

by Kathy Hodgson-Smith
(Métis, Saskatchewan)

Summary

Indigenous Peoples must have access to land, maintain a deep connection with the sacred aspects of life, and be supported by spaces that honor and uphold spiritual relationships. Kathy Hodgson-Smith emphasized this foundational point as she thanked participants for joining the conversation — one she described as the beginning of many to come. She highlighted Indigenous rights frameworks as critical pathways toward sustainability and underscored the importance of creating spaces where Indigenous voices are not only heard, but also genuinely respected and valued.

Indigenous Values



Annex 1.

Guiding Questions and Other Considerations for the Dialogue

To foster an open and inclusive exchange, a set of guiding questions was submitted to participants in advance of the event for validation. This annex presents the final list of guiding questions, as validated by roundtable participants, along with additional considerations proposed by invited experts. These questions — organized by theme or priority as identified by participants — were not intended to serve as a rigid agenda, but rather as prompts to support an open dialogue. They were designed to encourage the sharing of experiences, values, and perspectives on how Indigenous worldviews and relational approaches to commerce can contribute to more sustainable and equitable trade systems.

Session 1. Indigenous Worldviews and Approaches to Commerce and Trade: Relational Systems and Sustainability (private)

Open Roundtable Discussion with Guiding Questions (30 minutes per question)

1. *How have Indigenous concepts of relationality, reciprocity and well-being historically shaped economic and trade practices within your community, and how can these principles be integrated into today's regional economic systems?*
2. *How have Indigenous relationships to land and governance systems influenced trade and what challenges exist to better integrate them as part of current trade dynamics?*
3. *How have Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) and TEK influenced contemporary trade practices?*
4. *What opportunities exist to expand Indigenous-led trade models and perspectives, and what support is needed to strengthen the role of TEK, IKS, and Indigenous economic frameworks in today's markets?*

Other Considerations and Comments from the Participants Received Through the Survey

- The influence of external factors, such as the appropriation of land by transnational companies and the intellectual property of indigenous Knowledge.
- What role does the government play in promoting and strengthening indigenous business practices?
- How can Indigenous rights and access to lands and resources be better respected in business and trade?
- To what extent should trade agreements incorporate principles of wealth redistribution for indigenous communities (i.e., having regard to UNDRIP) and if so, how do they go about doing this?

Session 2. Foundations of Indigenous Trade in North America (private)

Open Roundtable Discussion with Guiding Questions (30 minutes per question)

1. *What were the foundational laws that shaped Indigenous trade in North America and what should/could be their impact on broader trade practices?*
2. *How were Indigenous trade networks structured historically, and how did they facilitate the exchange of goods, knowledge, and culture across North America?*
3. *What role can international trade agreements play in supporting Indigenous trade initiatives and ensuring sustainable trade practices across borders?*
4. *In what ways can IKS and TEK inform sustainable trade practices and resource management in North America?*

Other Considerations and Comments from the Participants Received Through the Survey

- Financing systems and support for the development of marketing tools in the local and regional market.
- How can indigenous trade be strengthened through technological innovation?
- How are Indigenous land resource rights important to transboundary trade and business development? How can Canada-US-Mexico trade agreements better honor these rights?
- Could be useful to discuss the role of civil society and social movements in supporting Indigenous legal revitalization in the context of forthcoming USMCA renegotiations.
- Should trade and tariff regimes account for Indigenous mobility rights as well as the import/export of cultural objects used for ceremonial purposes?
- Include historical trade networks that were beyond North America. Networks extended to South America and across the ocean.
- The question: “what were the foundational laws...” seems to address two separate things. The foundational laws are great but should be separated from the impact they have had on trade. The discussion on impacts is a large discussion, likely on the *lack* of their impact on trade practices. Perhaps the question should be: “What were the foundational laws....and what should/could be their impact on broader trade practices?”

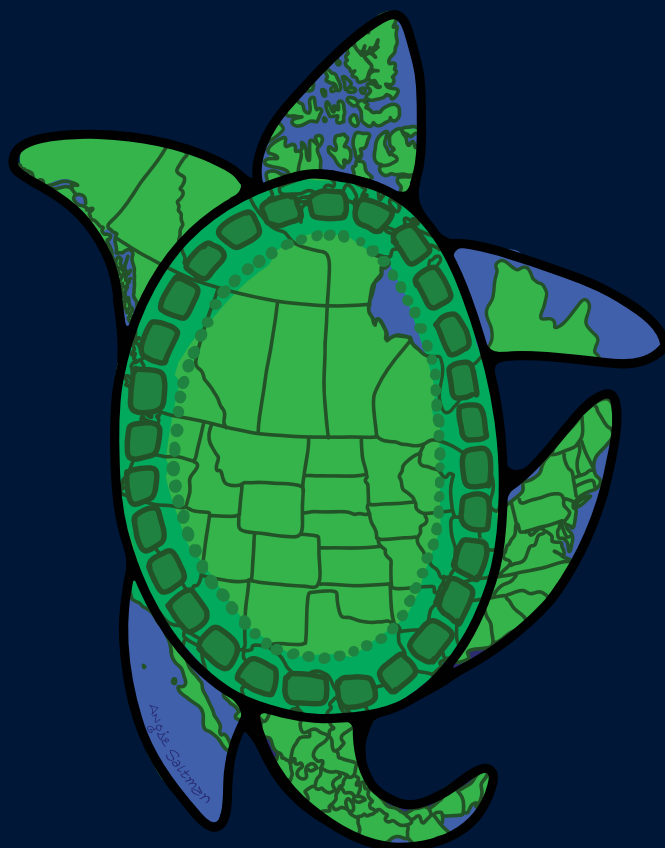
About Us

Commission for Environmental Cooperation (CEC)

In the context of environmental, economic and social linkages between Canada, Mexico and the United States, the CEC facilitates effective cooperation and public participation to conserve, protect and enhance the North American environment in support of sustainable development for the benefit of present and future generations.

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Since 1998, the McGill Bieler School of Environment has championed interdisciplinary education and continues to empower students to tackle complex environmental challenges by bridging theory and real-world problem-solving. As an undergraduate teaching and research unit, the BSE prioritizes collaboration across academic departments with the aim of addressing social, ecological and economic issues. The School is proud to have co-hosted this important initiative.





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